The Knight of Weyard

Story: The Knight of Weyard
Storylink: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4437761/1/
Category: Golden Sun
Genre: Adventure
Author: Drk Knght
Authorlink: https://www.fanfiction.net/u/1449264/
Last updated: 05/17/2010
Words: 59327
Rating: T
Status: Complete
Content: Chapter 1 to 10 of 10 chapters
Source: FanFiction.net

Summary: Book 1 of my Knight series! Set in the timeline of GS 2, a young boy is forced to leave his home and finds himself surrounded by the mystery of his exile. R&R!

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Knight of Weyard

Written by: Drk Knght

Summary: Set in the timeline of GS 2, a young boy is forced to leave his home and finds himself surrounded by the mystery of his exile. Journey with Ryo as he struggles to find answers to his questions. As he tries to find his place in the world, someone else watches him with great interest from the shadows.

Introduction

From the setting of the popular RPG game Golden Sun comes the tale of one young youth and his struggle between himself and his greatest adversary. He was thrust out into the world, unready and unprepared, on a quest that he neither wanted nor desired under conditions that were less than desirable. However, Fate seemed to be leading this young boy into circumstances that he had not expected. He would either had to grow up fast or be left behind and forgotten. This journey that was forced upon him will shape him and transform him from a child and into the "Knight of Weyard."

The story takes place sometime during the events of Golden Sun 2.

A/N: Here's how the formatting works. Any spoken dialogue is between "quotation marks." Any thoughts or mental dialogue is indicated with *italics*. When any character remembers something said in the past by someone else, that dialogue is indicated with "quotations" and *italics*. And the

narration of the story is anything that is not between quotes or in italics. BTW, Camelot own GS; I do not. I do own the original characters and the plot that you will soon read.

P.S. Please tell me something that I can improve on! If I use too big of words or if you can't understand what I've written, please review and tell me! I want to be a better writer and I can't do it unless I have input from you, the reader. If you don't like this story, tell me; if you do like this story, tell me *and* your friends. Anyways, I hope enjoy the story!

BTW, I've made a few changes and corrections to this story. For instance, Ryo's best friend's name was changed to Daishi. Plus i've tried to correct some misspelling and other things. Enjoy.

Chapter 2: Prologue

Prologue

A chilling evening breeze whistled through the village streets. The late winter air weaved its way deep into the heart of the once lively village. Every citizen was either sound asleep or close to it. Not a soul was in the streets save for one lone figure who stood outside in the street in front of a couple's home with something wrapped tenderly in his arms.

The figure stood at an imposing height, yet his actual body was shrouded in darkness from the night and from the black hooded robe which he wore. The one underneath the robe shifted uncomfortably and examined the area taking in every detail of his surroundings as if he was being watched. Protruding out from the cloak was the hilt of a mighty blade that had no doubt seen its share of combat. Yet, despite the worn hilt of the blade's continued use, his hands were gracious and tender enough to be cradling the form of his infant son.

A small coo of excitement and intrigue emanated from the young child as it beheld the face of his father for perhaps the final time. The young boy squirmed and writhed just like any young child and extended his small hand outward to his father. The father shuddered as small streams of water flooded his eyes and ran down his cheeks as he extended his finger to allow his son to grasp it one last time. He knew what he had to do, but it was by far the hardest thing he ever had to do.

"I'm so sorry, my son!" he wept as he brought the child closer to him. "I should have stopped him sooner! Now…

because of my involvement with him… your mother's been taken and I'll soon follow… He will seek out your life to no end until he has gotten from you what he wanted and then… he'll destroy you! And… that's not the life you should be forced to live… You shouldn't have to live in fear for your life… It's all… my fault…! Forgive me, my son…!"

The man knelt at the porch of the home weeping with his son in his arms for perhaps the last time. He slowly wiped away his tears and gazed into the blue eyes of his son and smiled.

"Someday, you'll grow up to be a fine man. Just like your old man." The man leaned down and kissed his son on the forehead and laid his son in a small, neatly dressed basket on the porch. He pulled out a scrap of paper that had a pre-written explanation and tucked the note in with the folds of the cloth of the basket. As he wrapped the small blanket around his son, his heart was warmed once again by the innocent smile and the gentle sounds that the baby child made. "Take care of your new parents, Ryo. And make your mother and I proud. I know you will. You're my flesh and blood after all."

Suddenly, a light illuminated through the crevices of the home out into the street where the figure stood. Whoever was inside probably heard the commotion outside and decided to investigate. The father looked one last time at his son. Feeling compelled to give his son one last gift, the father took off his dark robe and laid it as an added blanket over the child.

"Goodbye, my son! You'll make me proud. I know it…" the father swallowed hard wiping both his eyes and brow. The gentle shuffling of feet from someone inside could be heard nearing the door. The man stiffened and inhaled deeply. Not

wanting to be seen the man stole off into the blackness quickly leaving his son at the doorstep.

Not a second later, the door of the house opened and light illuminated the once darkened streets. The man who stood at the doorway was a man in his early thirties with an already receding hair line. He was dressed in his boxers with only a thin robe overtop that was not tied. Evidently, he had been in bed sleeping. As the man yawned and wiped his eyes clear, the light cast from the lantern in his hand shook about. When he opened his eyes, his gaze immediately fell upon the small basket on the porch and the form that occupied the contents.

"What's this?" the man proclaimed, suddenly not feeling any of the symptoms of drowsiness which usually accompanies one who has just woken up. He dropped down to his knees and lifted the lantern up to the basket. As he did, the small child cooed gleefully and reached out for the lamp with his small hands. "A… a child…!" The man pulled the dark cloak off of the child and noticed a small note. As he reached for the note, he heard the stirrings of his wife approaching from behind him. The husband turned around and said, "Honey! Look…!"

His wife, also arrayed in a simple night robe, wiped the sleep out of her eyes and followed the direction of her husband's outstretched hand. When her eyes beheld the small basket and the contents of the basket she gasped and practically tripped over her husband to reach the child.

"Ohhh… a baby…! He's so cute!" the woman exclaimed as she knelt down to the ground to get a better look at the baby. "How could anyone abandon such a beautiful little child like this?" She said as she stroked the child's cheek gently. When she slowly lifted the child out of the basket

and to herself, the child squirmed nervously and began to cry softly. "Shhhhh…" came the gentle, comforting voice of the mother as she began to rock back and forth in order to comfort the child. "It's all right, child. You're safe now. I'll take care of you." She slowly stood to her feet and wrapped the child closer in the loose folds of her robe.

"There was a note left with the child," the father stated as he held the note out to his wife.

"Well, read it already."

"All right! Let's see…" the father said as he handled the note so he could read it. "It says:

'Please give my son a better life than I or his mother could have ever given him. He deserves so much more than what can be offered him. I know that you could give my son a second chance at life.

P.S. His name is Ryouto. As you may find out later in his life, he is special. But please treat him as any other normal child. Thank you. And, Vaan, consider this the favor that I asked of you that one day I would need.

Signed,

Kazuhiro'."

"Wait! Did it just say…" the mother reached out for the note and began to read the barely legible words that were scribbled on the small parchment. "Vaan? Is… was he referring to you?" the wife proclaimed with tension in her voice. "Did this… Kazuhiro person… did he know you…?" She was cut off when the child in her arms began to cry from the increased tone of her voice and from the tension that rippled throughout her body.

"I-I… I'm not sure…" came the puzzled reply. "There was somebody… a long time ago who went by that name… but, I haven't heard from him in over…"

"We can talk about this later. For now, we need to get the child inside," interrupted the wife. "For one he's probably hungry and two he's probably cold from being out here. You can tell me inside. Gather these things and bring them inside. Whatever's going on here, we need to do our best to raise this child as our own and give him the life that his real parents would have wanted him to have."

"Right," the father nodded and gathered the black cloak, basket, and lantern in his hands and followed his wife into their modest home. As he gently kicked the door shut with his feet, the gentle cries of the young child were enclosed in the confines of the house and the street was once again silent and dark.

Just as the street was encased in darkness, three shadowy figures leapt down into the street. Each was clothed in all black clothing and armor and wore swords on their backs. They looked at each other through the narrow slits for their eyes when one of them motioned down farther on the street. They all nodded at each other and seemed to silently agree to fulfill their mission. They all dashed down the street and continued their pursuit.

Chapter 3: Ch 1: A Peaceful Ambush

Chapter 1: A Peaceful Ambush

Shimmering rays of light peaked over the horizon and welcomed the land of Weyard with its warming glow. Birds began chirping and filling the air with their morning songs. A gentle wind weaved its way across the country side and through the streets of the town of Cyril, a town nestled by the mountains north and west of the city of Kalay. Only a few shopkeepers and merchants occupied the streets preparing their wares for the day's market of consumers.

In a house near the southern end of town slept a boy in his upper teen years. His blond hair became more matted as he unconsciously rolled over onto his back. The morning light from the celestial body Sol filtered through the curtains of his upstairs room and cast rays of light onto his face. Life suddenly began to fill his body as the paralysis of sleep wore off. His closed eyes squinted under the light being shone into his eyes and he lifted an arm up to shield his eyes. With his arm somewhat shielding his eyes, he was able to slightly open them revealing his majestic ocean blue irises.

Vaguely was he aware of the door to his room opening, yet he still had that tingle in the back of his neck that his door was being opened. From just waking up, he was too tired to look over to confirm this feeling; however, he soon became aware of the creaking floor of his room meaning that someone was coming near. He leaned his head over with eyes slightly opened just in time to see a figure towering over his bed come toppling over onto his body.

"Geronimo!" the feminine voice sounded out quite loud as she toppled on top of the half-sleeping boy.

"Ohhh…" the boy cried out in pain under the weight of the person on top of him. "You're crushing me, Mom!" he said irritated as he squirmed around trying to get her off of him.

"It's time to get up," she said still lying perpendicular on top of the boy. "Here, let's open up these curtains." She got half way up until she was kneeling on his bed. Then she shifted one leg on the other side of the boy and straddled his legs as she leaned over to pull the curtains apart.

Get off of me right now! he exclaimed mentally. "Owww…" the boy hissed as the morning light pierced his eyes like daggers temporarily blinding him.

"There you go," the mother said satisfied that the curtains were open wide enough. She slowly leaned back away from the curtains and eventually off of her son's bed and was once again standing next to his bed. "If you get up now I'll make you breakfast. Don't sleep your day away. There's much work to be done. I've already been up for hours."

Well good for you… he thought spitefully. "Okay…" the boy muttered loud enough for her to hear. *Please just leave me alone and let me sleep.*

"All right. I'll be out in the kitchen when you're ready."

The boy sighed a very heavy grateful sigh when he saw his mother leave his room and partially shut his door. He laid there in his bed for a moment or two thinking to himself.

"Why does she have to do that?" he wondered out loud to himself. "I'm almost 18 years old. I'm not a kid any more. I don't understand why she does that and only to me! Ugh!" He placed his hands behind his head and just stared up at his ceiling and stretched a few muscles as he continued to mull over this thought. "I don't even want to get up." After

another few seconds he inhaled sharply and stretched out more vigorously and yawned. "Whatever… Another day in the life of Ryo, I guess…"

Ryo swung his legs over his bed and sat for a moment to orient himself with his surroundings and allow the blood to flow through his veins. He rubbed his eyes free of sleep and stretched his arms out once more letting out a great moan. "Yeeeaaah, thaat felt good. Now to find some clothes and head to the kitchen…"

After a quick search through his dressers, Ryo picked out a pair of loose fitting dark blue pants, white A-undershirt, a lighter short-sleeved blue tee shirt with some white strips on the sleeves, and a brown belt. Then he went over to his closet and slid the door open and grabbed for his favorite brown boots. As he put the boots on his feet from a sitting position on the end of his bed, Ryo's eyes fell upon the long cloak that was dangling from a hanger in his closet.

"Hmph." Ryo narrowed his eyes in contemplation as he focused his attention to the mysterious cloak. For some odd reason it seemed to emanate a soft blue hue, but Ryo passed it off as nothing. "I must be more tired than I think." He shook his head and rubbed his eyes again and finished putting on his boots.

Ryo stood to his feet and took one last glance into his closet and noticed a certain item coming out of its hiding place. Ryo reached for the black handle and pulled out a full length solid wood katana. After taking a brief look over the wooden blade and running his hand over some of the divots in the blade caused by it being used, Ryo gave it a few swings around in the air. "Wow. I'll practice with you later." He placed his practice sword back into hiding and slid the closet door shut. When he turned around and started to walk

out of his room he was pleased with just how much flexibility and comfort his entire outfit allowed. "It's perfect for practice later on."

A short walk out of his room and around a corner led Ryo out into the kitchen where his mother was sitting at the table reading something. She had an empty plate in front of her with small scraps of egg left on it.

"Morning, Sunshine!" she chimed looking up from her reading.

"Morning…" Ryo muttered still somewhat tired from his rude awakening.

"What'd you what for breakfast? Eggs, cereal, pancakes… Just let me know and I'll make it for you."

"Hmph. Okay." Ryo glanced at some of the things she had mentioned and nothing really seemed to catch his attention. He was hungry but nothing really seemed to jump out at him as something he wanted to eat. Then a conversation, or rather heated debate, came to his mind about last night. "Did… umm… you and Dad… uhhh… talk about yesterday…"

"About what?" his mother asked as she still read the paper.

"About-ta… me taking classes to… use a sword…" Ryo reiterated slowly trying to gauge his mother's reaction, but in the meantime stumbling over his words.

"Yeah, we did. And like we said yesterday, your dad and I don't have the money right now to pay for classes. And besides, he doesn't think that it's a very good idea. What would you do anyways? What's the point of it? Are you gonna beat up on the other kids or something?"

"No," Ryo stated forcefully appalled that she would think that. "I just think that it'd be something fun to do. And it'd be helpful with the increase in attacks outside the city."

"So you want to go out and kill monsters, is that it?" his mother asked with raised voice.

"No!" came the exasperated reply. "I said nothing about killing monsters! It's for self-defense. Protection. In case if I would ever need to go outside the city."

"But you don't need to go outside of the city. These 'monster attacks' or whatever they are occur far away from the city limits. There's no need for you to take sword lessons because someone needs to take over your father's business someday. Erija your brother is gone away for more learning and Marche doesn't seem to know what's going on. And we won't even go anywhere with your other brother."

"What if I don't want to take over? What if I want… to do something else…?" countered Ryo.

"Really like what?"

"Uh… hmmm… I don't know… maybe like an Alchemist or something…" Ryo said.

"Mmmhhhh…" his mother sighed skeptically. "You've been reading those weird books again, haven't you? That stuff is make-believe! It's not real! It's about time that you stop fantasizing and start living in reality. Someday you'll need to support yourself and your family with a real job. If you stay here, then you'll be guaranteed a job working in the fields like your father. That's how things are done. That's how things have been done for a long time now."

Ryo stood there in front of his mother in silence as he absorbed the words that she had just spoken to him. His countenance visibly dropped and his whole posture sagged. "Do I even have a choice in the matter?" Ryo said as he crossed his arms and slumped his body position onto one leg.

"Well, yeah, of course you have a choice. But someone still needs to take over the fields. Have some breakfast and go out and help your father. It's about time you kids start helping out around here. I'm the woman around here and it should be you boys who should be working, not me."

A sigh escaped from Ryo lips. *I contributed more than Erija ever did and more than Marche and Kyel do now! Does she not realize that?* He stood on spot for another few seconds and hesitantly asked, "So, about the sword training…?"

"For now, the answer is still a no. I mean, we don't really have the money right now. And I would feel safer if you weren't waving around a sword. Next thing you know you'll be swinging it inside the house and then something will get broken or you'll cut yourself and then what? Besides, someone needs to help your father with… Hey, where are you goin'? You haven't had any breakfast yet."

Knowing that talking to her would do no good and the longer he stayed the more mad he would become, Ryo decided that it was best for him to leave and eat breakfast another time when his mother was not around to bother him. "I… uh… forgot something in my room… And, besides, I'm not that hungry anyways…" Ryo then turned and headed back for his room. Once inside, he shut the door and headed straight for the closet and slid the door open. "If she only knew that I've been training myself." He reached inside and

pulled out the black wooden katana and smiled. "If she only knew…"

The light faded across the horizon from what seemed like a perfect day. Shimmering colors and shades of purple, blue, and orange painted the perfect ending to a perfect day in the city of Cyril.

Sitting atop a stone-finished roof, a short blond-haired young man leaned back and relaxed as he gazed into the dazzling colors of the sunset with a certain degree of awe. He looked on with his sea blue eyes wondering what was beyond the horizon that he was staring at. "I wish…" he sighed. "…awww… forget it. What good are dreams if you're not allowed to pursue them?"

His eyes fell to his side and to a book that lay next to him. It was one of his favorite stories about the lands beyond his hometown. It was actually a history book about the end of the Golden Age of mankind. It was the story of five Adepts who swore an oath to fight for the future of Weyard. His parents had thought that the book was just the work of someone's imagination. Despite that Ryo still insisted on getting the book. Even if his parents were right and it was the work of someone's imagination, Ryo still wanted to believe that somehow, some parts of it were true.

His mind then began to wander to the many other books that he had read. "These books…" Ryo reached down and grabbed the book at his side, "are one of the few things that my parents have allowed me to get," Ryo said to himself as he held the book in his lap. Adventures like the ones that the ancient heroes had burned a yearning in his soul for an adventure of his own. The various stories of knights and their way of life and their exploits of saving fair maidens were the interest of his free time. He had read many old

historical books that retold events of the past. Not only were past stories interesting to him but also the stories that the travelers had when they came through his town interested him. But with the increasing monster threat outside of town, venturing out unless one was either a skilled warrior or had protection was very unwise. And after a while, travelers began to come to town less often.

And, unfortunately, despite his constant pleading with his parents, Ryouto could not seem to convince them to let him get training. He wanted to go out and explore the surrounding area and come back with fascinating stories of his own like the other kids in town his age. They would talk about various caves and tunnels that they had explored and their close encounters with the "monsters" that had been discussed in the paper and around town. Apparently, they were just regular animals, but they were bigger and more aggressive than what they were a year ago before the eruption up north. But details about what had happened up north were sketchy at best. With fewer travelers coming through town, news of what had happened up north never reached them. But there were many rumors.

Ryo wanted so much to go there and find out what happened. However, his parents seemed fixated on the fact that he was going to take over the fields when his father was not able to. In fact, everyone in town thought that Ryouto would continue on in the path of his father. As his mother explained, it was customary from generation to generation that the son or sons would take over the business when the parents became unable to do so themselves. But deep in his heart and soul, Ryo truly resented the assumption that people had about him and his future. He wanted to set his own course in life and create his own destiny, but few shared his views.

He thought that he could turn to his friends for consoling, but he did not find it with them. In fact, most of the people whom he had grown up with had always looked at him with a look of distain and disgust. At least, that what it seemed like to him. Throughout his schooling, Ryo had exhibited a high intelligence and was most recently named one of the top graduating students from his class. Maybe that was why people looked at him differently. Or maybe it was because of some other reason. But whatever the reason, people just seemed to avoid him. With this being the case, he found his comfort in reading history books like the one in his lap.

Ryo was not a very outgoing person and he continued to be more introverted. He was fairly shy around people and especially around girls whom he had a bit of an attraction for. He could talk to people if he needed to but when it came to a girl he like, welll… it went like this: no matter how much he wanted to, no matter how much he tried to, he could not bring himself up to telling a girl that he liked her. In fact, in recent days, he did have his eyes on one particular girl. However, the throngs of testosterone surrounding her always impeded his efforts to get close to her. But he could wait. After all, he had contact with her that few other people had. The two of them had studied together alone. Few others had that kind of opportunity.

This girl was one of the people who also graduated with top honors for her smarts. She truly was a special young lady who deserved to be treated as such. But for now he was content with just sitting back and enjoying the time that he had to himself. As Ryouto continued to ruminate over the various issues that he had, a voice called out to him, breaking the deep-rooted concentration that he once had.

"Hey, Ryo! Finally, I found you!" Ryouto peered down from the roof at the sound of his shortened name to see a

medium-height, short brown-haired young man who had been his friend for the longest time standing in front of his house. His medium built body was hid beneath the red and gray-trimmed long-sleeved shirt and his gray and red-trimmed pants complementing the rest of his person.

"Are you going to come to the party, or what?" He inquired impatiently, almost out of breath from running around.

"Umm… Party?"

"Did you forget already? The party for our graduation and for the founding of our town. How could you forget?"

"Ohh! Right! I'll be there, don't worry, Daishi." Ryo answered his impatient and active friend. Daishi had always been a fairly active person, not as active as some people that Ryo knew, but Daishi was an active and upbeat kind of person nonetheless. He was so upbeat that Daishi could not keep a steady girlfriend. But maybe he liked it that way. Who knows? Ryo was done trying to figure him out. "Is everyone else gonna be there?" Ryo called out. "I mean, like, from our class?"

"Yup. And don't forget, your woman Tinaro will be there speaking," Daishi remarked with raised voice intonation.

"What?" Ryo exclaimed. "She-she's not *my* woman. We're just friends!"

"Uh huh. Sure. Whatever," Daishi replied not believing a word. "Anyways, hurry up. If she's not your woman then there are a plenty of other girls there for you to claim! Besides, I'm hungry and they have a lot of food! Running around and trying to find you really worked up my appetite. Hurry up, the celebration has already begun!"

Whatever! Always thinking of girls and your stomach. Ryo thought to himself. "Alright, alright! Let's go! I can't wait to see everyone again. It's been far too long. And this party will be the perfect chance to meet up with everyone again." *And I will hopefully be able to talk to Tinaro longer than just a few minutes.* Ryo thought to himself. A smile found its way onto Ryo's face as he thought about her. *I can't wait.*

The two friends lightly chatted with each other and approached the decorated pavilion in which the party was being held. The party was already in full swing and there were people everywhere filling the building being used. As they approached the crowd, a familiar face came to greet them. A face that Ryo was always delighted to see. A face that belonged to the person whom he had a crush on but could not bring himself to tell her.

"Hi, guys!" she called out enthusiastically, shrugging her shoulders upwards and smiling cutely. *She always looks cute when she does that*, Ryo mused within himself. And unlike other girls, he felt very comfortable around this dark blonde-haired beauty. This was his crush for so many years but he just could not seem to tell her his feelings. But the number of times he had wanted to tell her were innumerable!

The male blond scanned her from head to toe admiring her elegant, yet simple, violet based, white polka dotted shirt. The short sleeves of the garment showed off her female shapely arms that glistened in the moonlight revealing a nice tan. Around her waist resided a silken violet ribbon that acted like a belt but served for the sole purpose of complimenting the rest of her attire. Her simple, flowing white skirt followed and it was one of Ryo's favorites. It was ruffled at the bottom edges and ended at her mid-calf region. Her smooth, elegant calves could be seen protruding from the bottom of the beautiful outfit finally ending with

her flat white shoes. To put it short and simple, she looked amazing.

Ryo was in a daze at her beauty and was finally snapped back into reality when she regarded him with a cute little smile that always would make him blush.

"Hiya, Ryo. It's been a long time since we've seen each other. What's up?" She inquired of him, giving him a playful nudge on the arm. As she looked up at him, her penetrating gaze on him made him feel warm on the inside and yet, he felt uncomfortable and nervous at the same time. Ryo tried not to show any of these feelings that were going on even as she spoke to him.

"Oh, nothin' much. I'm just taking it easy for the summer." Ryo replied half-nonchalantly, shrugging his shoulders and giving her a sly smile. He wanted to feel comfortable around her, but for some reason today he did not feel as comfortable around her as he usually did. Maybe it was because her attire that made her look so divine? For whatever the reason, he felt a bit uneasy in his stomach and tried to suppress that feeling but his efforts were in vain. Forcing himself from his love-struck state, Ryo asked Tinaro a question in reply. "How have you been, Tinaro? You… you look great!"

"Thank you! I'm doing wonderful! Come on, you guys! The celebration has already started," Tinaro declared quickly running off and leading the boys to the main hall of the pavilion where the celebration would eventually end with a speech from one of the graduates and a toast to the graduates and to the city.

Tinaro would be that speaker and she would raise the final toast for the graduates. She was fairly popular, especially

among the other teen males in her class and her age. At any one moment, usually, Tinaro would be surrounded by people, mostly males, vying for her attention. Some wanted to get close to her in order to be her friend, but a majority of the guys that hung around her wanted more than just friendship.

Ryo was sickened when he learned of what most of the guys wanted to do with her, or rather *to* her other than just being her friend. He had overheard many of their conversations without them knowing and it made him sick. It was true that he was one of the ones who would always hang around her, but his reasons were no where near the intentions of those other guys. Most of the time, though, Ryo would stay back, giving Tinaro much needed space. After all, he sometimes needed his own space from people. He was a true friend to her and a loyal one at that. Whenever she needed someone to talk to, Ryo had been there for her. And things worked vice versa. And even when she did not need to talk to anyone, Ryo was still there supporting her.

Tinaro did have friends who were girls and she did hang around them but when she needed to talk to a guy who was not actively trying to get something more in return, she would go to Ryo. Whether she realized it or not, Ryo tried in his own way to win her heart. But so far, he was not doing a good job. He could only get in a few words before someone else maneuvered himself into the conversation and then he would take over.

It did not seem as if Ryo could get in any word of his feelings to Tinaro. He had tried on several occasions to tell Tinaro how he felt about her but each time that he had tried, someone would show, as if right on cue, and interrupt the conversation. In light of that, Ryo made a decision to wait for

a little bit and look for the opportune moment to tell her how he felt about her.

But for now, he would enjoy this celebration that was already in full motion. In fact, because he nearly forgot about it, it was nearly over. Ryo had almost missed it because he lost track of what time it really was. He did manage to have a little to eat and walk around a bit before the final toast to the graduates. The time came faster than Ryo would have liked and he was forced to stand in the back of the pavilion with his drink in hand. Luckily, Daishi was also in the back with him partly because he was still munching on what food was still left on the tables. It was now time for the final speech from their homecoming queen, Tinaro. As she gracefully strode up to the platform, the smiling expression on her face made everyone watching her smile, especially Ryo.

Looking upon her standing in front of the pedestal, Ryo was awe struck at how the different lights that were set up made Tinaro even more breath-taking. The light reflected off of her in just the right way that she looked angelic. As she began speaking, her voice echoed through the building and all eyes were focused on her. Ryo was not focused entirely on what she was saying because he was still awe struck by her radiance. He wished right now more than anything that he could tell her how he really felt about her.

Tinaro had everyone's full attention from where she stood. She had captivated her audience from the very beginning. Of course, all of her "fan club" of guys watched her with a look of desire in their eyes. They stood close to the front of the crowds of people so that they were right in front of the pedestal. Tinaro, as she was taught in class, looked about the whole room and into people's faces to get her message across. It was quite obvious that she had practiced her

speech because she very rarely looked down at her notes. When her eyes fell to the back of the room and onto the two young men standing in the back, Tinaro smiled really big and kind of stumbled on her words for a brief moment. Ryo could not help but feel his pulse quicken and his temperature rise. It was already hot and stuffy in the room, but now…

Ryo began to feel a bit faint. "Hey, Daishi," he whispered to his friend. "I need to step out and get some fresh air."

"Oh! Alright! I'll tell you if she mentions you," Daishi remarked with a cheesy grin and a poke to Ryo's ribs.

"Ha ha… very funny," Ryo quietly laughed as he stepped out into the open air. With so many people in one place, the air had begun to get stale and the temperature in the room was a lot higher than usual. As much as Ryo did not want to leave in the middle of Tinaro's speech, he had to or else he would have passed out or something.

Meanwhile at the front, Tinaro noticed some movement near the back of the pavilion. It was Ryo, and he was leaving.

Where is he going? Tinaro wondered in the back of her mind. *Did I say something wrong? I'll go out later and talk to him to see if he's all right.*

As soon as he stepped outside of the overcrowded pavilion, Ryo felt a cool, refreshing breeze blow from the direction of the Karagol Sea over his body and through his golden blond hair. Almost immediately, he forgot about all the troubles that he had and he just relished the moment of the cool breeze, allowing it to soothe his aching muscles. Closing his eyes made the feeling a being fully relaxed an even more prevailing feature of being outside the pavilion. He stood in

this position for a long moment, enjoying his environment and the fresh, un-stale air that he could breathe.

Ryo was totally oblivious to the outside world but was suddenly brought back into reality when suddenly he felt a hand caress his shoulder. He turned around to see none other than Tinaro herself.

"Hey, Ryo. Is everything okay?" she asked tilting her head to one side. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, of course not. You did an amazing job." Ryo did not turn around to face Tinaro but rather continued take pleasure in the calm wind that wafted from sea. The breeze traveled around Ryo's body and made its way across Tinaro's body, blowing her hair gently with the wind.

With his head humbled, he replied with closed eyes and a bass-like voice, "Sorry that I had to leave in the middle of your speech. I was feeling kind of faint. But what I did hear from your speech was absolutely fantastic."

Tinaro was taken aback by his words and it was evident by the warm glow that emanated from her cheeks. She had not expected that from Ryo but was not exactly surprised. After all, Ryo had always been kind to her and considerate of her feelings and, most of all, he always seemed to be close when she was having a rough day. It was as if he had some kind of power that made her feel better when she was not feeling so well herself.

"Thank you. I was hoping that you would like it. I put a lot of work into it and thanks to your help, it was a lot better." Tinaro glided in front of Ryo until both of them were practically face to face. Ryo opened his eyes to see his long time crush standing right in front of him in the perfect position. The full moon light glimmered off of her face giving

her a surreal glow which further drove Ryo's deep inward passion.

"You're very welcome. Anything for you," Ryo whispered as he started to lean in closer to the beauty and she did the same. The wind slow picked up speed and blew at both of the young teens. Tinaro's skirt flared around slightly but she did not seem to notice because she was caught up in the moment. "Tinaro, y-you look s-so amazing. I-I just want you to know…" he stammered but she place a finger on his lips to silence him and the gap between them slowly began to diminish, his heart beating rapidly as with her heart.

Ryo listened to his surrounding wishing that this moment could last forever. He was about to give his crush the kiss that would show her his true feelings! How he had waited for this moment for so long! Now was the time that he had anticipated for so long! The environment was perfect for his first kiss to the girl of his dreams. This was the most peaceful moment that he had ever experienced in his eighteen years of existence.

Suddenly, his senses alerted him to a soft, nearly inaudible, but ominous whistling through the air heading in their direction. Acting on what seemed to be instinct, Ryo quickly wrapped his arms around her body, bent his knees, and thrust himself into Tinaro. Both of them fell toward the ground at an angle with Tinaro underneath. But as they were in the air, Ryo spun around so as to take the brunt of the fall. Ryo landed on the ground with such force that not only was the wind knocked out of him but also he skidded on the ground a few feet. As they were coming to a halt, both of them heard the zing and thud of metal impaling itself into the ground. A closer observation revealed that if they would have remained in their previous position, both of them

would have been impaled by a cold steel blade: a short katana blade, at that.

Ryo, with Tinaro still in his arms, lay there on the ground writhing in pain from the shock of the blow and gasping for air. Thankfully, Tinaro seemed to be in good health and in one piece which eased the pain.

As Tinaro rolled off of Ryo, a loud battle cry was heard and dozens of dark-clothed, masked warriors, each armed with a katana, appeared seemingly everywhere from the early darkness granted by the evening. They came running at the small town and its inhabitants with their swords drawn ready to kill anything that moved.

A few of the armed soldiers at the pavilion party, who were for security purposes, drew their swords ready to defend against those who would harm what they had come to love. Some of the other men who were not armed grabbed nearby items and used them as weapons. Other men raced back to their homes to grab their weapons and return to defend their beloved town. All other non-combatants ran back to their respective homes to seek shelter and a hiding place from the ambush. It was just a mad rush of people running everywhere.

Unfortunately, a few of the townsfolk did not make it back to their homes and were ruthlessly slaughtered in their desperate attempt at escape. One such incident happened as a man with his wife fled back to their home so that she would have safety from this ambush. However, a dark warrior appeared in front of them and slashed quickly at them, letting no reaction possible. As the two dropped to the ground, both held each other's hand and fell with a thud as they hit the ground.

The ninja looked around to find his next prey and spotted a young couple near the entrance of the town, one wearing a white skirt and violet shirt while the other wore an outfit similar to that of a traveler. The young man stood to his feet and grabbed a shorter katana sword that had a violet handle and held it up against the attackers.

"Argh! That idiot! That boy is using his own blade against him! I just need to search for Ryouto..." the ninja paused in mid-sentence and took a closer look at the boy wielding the sword that was thrown at him. "Wait a minute... Could that be... Ryouto...? It... must be!" He quickly scurried off to his next victim, the older couple held onto the last of their life and spoke with each other.

"He's going after... Ryo...!" the lady said trembling. "What do we do?"

"There's nothing... that we can do... except pray that the spirit... of his real father watches over him... Let's pray that he...survives," the man replied in angst knowing that if no one came to help his son that he would perish like they were.

"I wish that I... I could tell him just how proud... we are of him," the wife said in sorrow. "I think that we've been too hard on him. And now..."

"We'll just have to believe... he will make it. And that he will choose the right path. His father was a strong man and Ryo has his father's blood running in his veins. He'll make it." A shadow then slowly encompassed them as they faded into the beyond.

Ryo realized fairly quickly that he and Tinaro were right in the midst of the attack. Thinking quickly, he reached for the nearby katana blade that was less than two feet away and

unearthed it. He felt a strange sensation wash over his body as he grabbed the blade, but he passed it off as adrenaline from the situation. He stood to his feet and readied himself to fight to save his friend, willing even to pay the ultimate price.

The blade that he wielded was made from a darker-colored type of steel. Surprising lightweight, the katana's little actual weight was focused in the blade and not in the handle. Despite its light weight, the blade was finely made and appeared to be an extremely sturdy weapon. The handle was made with a fine violet-woven fabric and the intricate hilt design shimmered in the pale moon light. The dark-bladed katana fit almost perfectly in his hand as if it were made for him.

Ryo gave the sword a practice swing by his and was thoroughly satisfied with the craftsmanship. The weapon was a bit heavier than his practice wooden sword, but still the weight was manageable. He looked behind him to the kneeling, shivering form of Tinaro.

"Stay behind me!" His senses suddenly peaked in front of him. Without looking and acting on what came naturally Ryo swung the sword out in front of him defensively and was struck with a down-coming blade. When Ryo finally moved his head to look what had happened, he was face to face with a masked assailant. The force of the blade coming down on him was incredible and unlike anything Ryo was used to. Even though he had practiced, it was not with other people in a duel. Ryo buckled under the weight and fell to one knee as the assassin forced more of his weight into the blade.

"You… will… die!" hissed the assassin.

Ryo strained under the pressure and gripped the handle more fiercely. He then moved his left hand from off the handle and onto the dull edge of his blade to help hold the blade up.

"I…" Ryo began, "will… protect… Tinaro!" With all of his might, Ryo swung his right leg out and around his assailant's leg and kicked the back of his legs. The ninja was caught off guard and was swept completely off his feet and started to tumble backwards. Ryo spun in the dirt and dropped his foot down for balance. The assassin landed on the ground with a thump, but he quickly rolled backward and was back on his feet.

"You'll pay for that!" the ninja yelled angrily as he came in for another attack.

Ryo leapt up to his feet and met the diagonal swing of his attacker with the same diagonal swing of his own blade. The two blades clashed together and a flurry of sparks leapt from the contact of metal on metal. Then they thrust off on another and the ninja spun around and attacked with a lateral slice. But again Ryo was able to counter the attack with his lightweight sword. Sparks once again leapt off from the contact of the blades. The ninja slashed upward and diagonal in hopes of Ryo losing hold on the blade. Ryo, however, held fast to the handle. Ryo's sword arched over his head with the blade pointed back. The way that Ryo's hands were positioned looked as though Ryo was flexing his biceps. Suddenly, Ryo realized that the blade of the attacker was above his head and that he did not have enough time to counter the imminent attack.

"Die…!" came the dark tone from the attacker as he swung his sword down to cut Ryo in a diagonal half.

No... It can't end this way... It won't...! Because I won't let it end this way! Ryo moved his hands further up the handle of the sword until they were squeezed up against the blade guard and moved the handle in the path of the down swung blade. The ninja's blade stuck hard in the handle of Ryo's blade.

"What?" exclaimed the ninja.

Without missing a step, Ryo thrust upward making the ninja lose his grip on his weapon and quickly spun around with his back to the ninja and impaled the dark blade into the belly of his attacker. The ninja froze in disbelief as he felt his life-blood flowing from his body. He looked down to still see his blade stuck in the handle of the blade that had impaled him.

"Im- Imposs... ible..." the ninja breathed as his body suddenly went limp. Victory had gone to Ryo; however, it was short lived when the cry of one certain female alerted Ryo to imminent danger. He looked up to see a group of ninja's approaching Tinaro. Ryo pushed the ninja off of the blade and grabbed at the handle of his enemy's weapon and tore it from the handle of his weapon. Now armed with two blades, Ryo yelled and charged straight at the assassins determined to make them meet their end.

Looking up just in time, the three ninjas moved speedily: one crouched down and secured the young girl and placed his longer blade at her throat and a hand around her head to cover her mouth while the other two shifted into a defensive position in front of the captured lass. Ryo immediately stopped his attack run, his feet skidding in the dirt as he did so. The center ninja glared at the boy and then jumped a bit as if he remembered something.

"It's you!" The ninja hissed out his words. "You… you're the one… Ryouto Yanjan!" Ryo stiffened at the sound of his name by this stranger. *Wait a minute, what did he say? How does he know my name?* Ryo stood in front of the ninjas puzzled and was brought back when the center one said, "Put down the swords and come with us or else…" he glanced at the girl squirming in his arms, "…or else she dies."

For some strange reason, Ryo felt both fearful and angry at the same time. This man was threatening the life of the very woman he loved which angered the blond teen immensely. But, he was fearful in that if he complied that he and Tinaro would be killed. Ryo thought through his options but with the blade so close to Tinaro's neck he had no choice but to comply with the demands laid out in front of him.

"Okay, okay. You win. Just don't hurt Tinaro," Ryo said with caution and anxiety at what would happen next. As he slowly began to bend his knees to place his weapons on the ground he looked at the sandy blonde-haired female and said to her, "Tinaro, this is the only way. I would do anything to protect you and I hope that you know that. Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

Tinaro nodded her head shakily. Her eyes welled up with tears and she seemed to shiver in place as she knelt there in the dirt.

Ryo bent his knees and slowly lowered the blades down to the ground in the shape of an X in front of him, left blade first and then the right blade. As he went down, though, he kept his eyes on Tinaro. On his way back up, Ryo was pushed back down to the ground by one of the defending ninja's blade that was placed across his shoulder, the sharp

edge pointed toward his neck. The other ninja did the same but on Ryo's other shoulder.

"What the…? What's this? What's going on?" Ryo demanded fear now suddenly striking his heart.

"Kneel there and shut up!" the lead ninja said. He shifted his gaze to the girl in his possession. "I take it then that this is your woman, Ryo. Hmmm. And a fine woman you've found indeed. It's a shame that she's going to waste on you," the ninja holding Tinaro said demonically shifting her face back and forth.

"Let her go! Now!"

The ninja simply laughed. "I don't think you're in a position to be making demands." The ninja glared at the blond-haired young man and then looked at the girl whom he had captured and a devious thought entered his mind. He lowered his blade from the young female's long, slender neck but with the other arm he still held her fast. Then he lowered the cloth from off of his mouth and smiled an evil grin. "It's a shame that you have to watch." With that, the ninja forced his lips upon Tinaro's.

Ryo's eyes widened considerably. "Stop it!"

Ryo felt sick to his stomach as he watched helplessly the grotesque scene unfolding before his very eyes. His hands clenched in rage and his knuckles turned white. He felt his body temperature rise to a blood-boiling high. Thoughts of revenge began to boil inside of his soul. In fact, a barely visible aura began to emanate from off of Ryo of a fiery red hue. The air around the boy began to heat up and contort as the aura grew.

Tinaro was obviously fighting his advancement by the way she was trying to squirm out of the stronger man's grasp. But he held onto her and kept her still. However, Tinaro managed to slip one of her hands from his grasp and with all of her might, she came down hard on the other man's face with her newly-freed hand. Suddenly startled, he released her momentarily. That was just the right opportunity that Tinaro wanted and needed to escape because she got up and tried to run away.

Enraged, the ninja quickly clutched onto Tinaro's ankle. Tinaro braced herself as she began to come crashing back down to the ground with a sickening thud. The lead ninja grabbed his blade and signaled to his two other companions to eliminate the witness. "Get him out of here! I need to take care of this wretch here and teach her some manners!" The dark ninja then turned his attention to the beauty who lay sprawled out on her belly on the ground.

The two ninjas looked back down at Ryo only to see that their swords were without the blades. Drops of something trickled down Ryo's shoulders, down on his back, and on the ground next to him, on both sides of him, and in front of him. They stood in horror as they beheld small pools of liquefied metal on the ground that looked like it was boiling. Their blades, including Ryo's, had melted away! Dumbfounded by this event, the ninja's were paralyzed with fear and were at a loss of what to do as they felt an immense heat radiate from the boy. It felt as if one was standing close to a burning fire.

Ryo was infuriated by what he had just seen and simply lost control. He felt the sting of the melted steel as it trickled down his back, but he did not care. All he cared about was making these guys pay for what they did. Suddenly, Ryo seemed to explode with flames and the flaming bodies of

the two ninjas came flying outward on either side. The ground around the boy was instantly blackened and fire burned all about him.

The dark ninja, who was kneeling, had Tinaro pinned on the ground. Her face was covered in fear and perspiration as she quivered from what she knew was inevitable. The ninja was going to make this girl pay for slapping him the way that she did. He raised his blade above his head in an effort to strike her down right there, but his assault was suddenly halted when he felt the ground shake behind him with the force of an explosion. He turned around to see a burning fire and the silhouette of a man stepping from the flames towards him.

"What's this? What's going on?" the ninja yelled.

A dark, unnatural voice echoed from the lips of the silhouette. "Kneel there and shut up!" The figure stepped closer and closer and closer. Finally, he was close enough so that his face could be seen. It was Ryo, but he looked different. His hair seemed to burn like the flames behind him and his eyes glowed red as the color of an untamed fire. "I told you to let her go… Now you'll pay!" Ryo's hand suddenly reached out and grasped around the man's mouth. The sizzle and smell of burning flesh filled the air. The screams of the ninja were muffled by the hand over his mouth. He struggled to free himself but to no avail. Then Ryo lifted the man's face so that their eyes could meet.

"It's a shame that you have to sit and watch!" came the deep, dark tone from Ryo. "Why don't you go have a… look!" As he said the word 'look', Ryo with an unnatural strength pulled on the man's face and tossed him into the flames behind him. The ninja's screams became audible as he flew through the air into the flames. Ryo watched the man soar into the flames and was satisfied that he, too, was gone.

With his victory, Ryo could now relax. The aura about him diminished and the air began to cool down. He could hear the cheers of many as apparently the attack on their town had ceased. The assault had been stopped, but at what cost?

Tinaro lay on the ground, still quivering because of what had just happened. Her breathing was heavy and her entire body dripped with perspiration. She could feel her heart thumping rapidly in her chest. As much as she tried to move, her muscles did not seem to want to respond. A knot welled up in her throat and it became hard to breathe let alone speak. Fresh tears trickled down her cheeks over old dried tears that had evaporated due to the sudden temperature spike. She clenched her eyes shut wishing for it all to be over.

"Are you okay?"

Tinaro slowly opened her eyes to see a tall, blond haired, blue eyed young man standing before her with his arm outstretched. Still a little shaken up, Tinaro reached up for Ryo's hand and he grasped her hand firmly yet gently and pulled her up and off the ground. Their bodies came within inches of each other and their eyes met for the first time since the start of the ambush.

"I… I…" Tinaro choked out. She could not seem to talk.

"It's okay! You're safe now. I've got you…" Ryo said softly as he pulled her closer to him in a warm embrace. A very warm embrace.

"You're… burning up…" Tinaro whispered. She reached out a hand to his forehead and felt his temperature. "Are you okay? Feels like you have a fever."

"I'm fine…" Ryo whispered back. He reached for her hand and pulled it off his head. Her hand drifted back down to her side and then around Ryo's back. Ryo's hand settled on the back of her neck and he stroked her neck with his fingers. Then without even thinking about it, Ryo lifted his head slightly and gave a quick kiss on Tinaro's forehead. It was not too long but it did catch Tinaro off guard.

Her head suddenly shifted and she backed away just enough so that her eyes could pierce into the depths of Ryo's deep blue eyes.

"You're safe…" Ryo said. He felt his head lean down towards her on instinct. *Finally, I'll have my...*

"Tinaro! Tinaro! Are you okay?" Both Ryo and Tinaro were startled from their world and looked to see who had interrup… who had called out to them, or at least to Tinaro anyways. It was one of the many who had defended the city, Tyson. He ran over to the two and was out of breath by the time he reached them.

He was a tall, dark-haired young man who was slightly bigger than Ryo in the area of muscles but he was shorter than Ryo by a few inches. Despite his dirtied face and slightly tattered clothing, he was not a bad sight to look at. And if Ryo did not know any better he would say that this Tyson character liked Tinaro. Who did not?

"Tinaro. Are you okay? I got over here as soon as I could. You're not hurt are you?" Tyson asked sympathetically. "Come on. Let's get you someplace safe. They may still come… Whoa!" Tyson looked back behind Tinaro and saw the blackened ground and thousands of black lines radiating out on the ground from the burn site. The grass that had not been burned away was either crispy black or a sickly wilted

brown color. But what caught Tyson's attention the most was the foul stench of burned human flesh. "What happened here?" His wandered the landscape trying to make sense of the scene that lay before his eyes. Then he saw Ryo. The edges of his clothes were scarred and blackened and were tore away. And there were numerous small burn holes in his shirt and pants. Ryo's face was also blackened and dirty and looked as if he had just been in the coal mines of Altin. "What did you do!" Tyson asked incriminatingly as he started to pull Tinaro away from him and slowly began to walk back to town.

Ryo watched in agony as his long-time crush walked off with this ruffian. As he gazed on at Tinaro and her escort, he suddenly dropped to one knee unable to breathe. His left hand fell to the ground to brace himself while his right hand gripped his left side. Ryo winced in pain as he suddenly felt himself flush with heat. Tinaro was right. He was burning up! His right hand, which was still clutching his left side, brushed across something on his back. As he felt his back further Ryo discovered that most of his shirt had been burned away and that his skin ached with a fury of a raging inferno. *The swords...* Ryo thought.

Gritting his teeth, Ryo winced at the pain he felt. He had felt nothing like this before. Then Ryo felt something small and sharp impale into his neck. He reached for the source of the pain and pulled out a small dart. "What the…!" Ryo said as he looked at the strange looking dart. Sounds began to get more and more distorted. He closed his eyes and bowed his head and heard the voices around him become more distant than they did before. For a brief moment, Ryo thought that he had heard his name being called out, but he soon collapsed due to the extreme amount of exhaustion and effort he put into saving Tinaro and maybe from whatever he

was shot with. In any case, he collapsed and then heard nothing at all as darkness surrounded him.

Off in the trees, one of the surviving ninja glared at the now lifeless body of this boy. "I… I swear to you Ryouto that I, Zabuza, will take revenge for the loss of my comrades. If you survive my poison dart then I shall make you suffer unlike anything you've experienced before." With that, the one known as Zabuza disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter 4: Ch 2: A Stealthy Getaway

Chapter 2: A Stealthy Getaway

"Is he going to be alright?" a female voice asked.

"I believe that he'll be fine. He just needs some rest. Watch over him and let me know if anything else comes up. I have a lot more patients to treat." The older lady sighed. "It's a shame that his parents aren't here for him."

"Yeah, I know. I can't imagine how it must feel to have lost your parents. But, I'll be here for him when he wakes up. Thanks, Mom."

Ryo lay stretched out on an especially soft surface and heard gentle voices talking to each other. Life suddenly began to flow back into his body. Ryo's hand tightened in reflex to his consciousness and he felt in his own hand the smooth, soft touch of another person's hand, a feminine hand. He slowly began to open his eyes and light began to flood his darkened world. Numbness left his body and feeling returned to his nerves and limbs. He soon became aware of a presence sitting close to him and a hand stroking his forehead. Ryo opened his eyes and beheld a familiar countenance overshadowing his own. A friendly smile greeted his weary eyes. In a sweet, kind voice, she gently spoke to him.

"Hi, Ryo. How are you feeling?"

"Hey, Tinaro." Ryo tried to sit up but was soon stopped by the extreme pain that shot up his body. He groaned in pain and Tinaro got up out of her chair and lightly eased him back down.

"Easy now. You took quite a few blows from the attack a couple days ago. You need to rest," Tinaro spoke in comfort as she sat back down in her chair.

"Oh… okay…" Ryo responded as if in a daze. Then her words began to register in his mind. "Wait, a couple days? How… How long was I out? W-what happened?" Ryo strained as he tried to turn over on the bed to face her.

"It's been about three days," Tinaro answered grimly as if hesitant to even bring up that nightmare of an evening. "That night, as I was heading back into town with Tyson, I thought that you had been hurt and I turned around to see if you were okay. But as soon as I turned around, I saw you suddenly fall to your knees, and… and I just… well, I panicked." Tinaro's body started to quiver and shake, but she still continued. "I mean, I was so scared that I didn't know what to do. I called for you and ran to your side and tried to help. I didn't know how to help. I told Tyson to get help while I tried a few things that I had learned that might help. People soon came running over and then the doctors came over. They said that you were pretty beat up and that you needed immediate attention. You were quickly taken to the closest house, which happened to be mine, where after a few hours of examination, they said…"

Tinaro's eyes began to water and her voice whimpered and dropped off. Her hand trembled with the memory of that night. Her throat seemed to dry up in thirst, yet she was not thirty. She suddenly felt sick to her stomach. Her eyes shifted down to the floor unable to keep his gaze and her whole posture slumped in her seat.

"What's wrong?" Ryo asked with great concern. His brow furrowed as he gazed at her trying to read her mind to see

what the problem was. He reached out and gently rubbed her hand saying, "Tinaro…"

"Ryo!" she interrupted as she began to sob. "Y-you… should be dead! All of the doctors who looked you over said that you wouldn't live much longer. Even my mom looked you over and said that there was nothing that they could do. Tears streaked down her cheeks the more fervently. "But I- I refused to listen to them. Y- you had a weak pulse… and you had lost a lot of blood… and you had burns all over your body but especially severe burns on your back… On top of that, they said that maybe you'd been poisoned. They did what they could but still only gave you maybe a day to live…"

"Tinaro…" Ryo whispered to the whimpering female.

"I refused to accept that you would die. I mean, we've grown up together and…" she began to weep so much that her words came out more and more vague.

Ryo was at a loss as to what to do or say. He had never seen her like this before, and it hurt him to see her in such emotional torment. He wanted nothing more than to comfort her somehow. Give her a hug maybe. However, he was in such pain that it hurt to move, but he wanted to comfort her in some way. After all, she was in more pain than he could ever have imagined. Ryo reached out and grasped Tinaro's hand in his, giving it a small squeeze in an effort to give her some support.

"What happened then?" Ryo asked, breaking the silence. "How am I still here? Why am I still alive if I was only given a day to live?"

Tinaro wiped the tears from her eyes, composed herself, and answered Ryo's question with a little more confidence than

before thanks to the feeling of Ryo's soft hand in her hand. As she looked down at their interlocked hands, a feeling of warm began to flood her body and she felt a bit more confident.

"That's the thing," Tinaro said using her other hand to wipe her eyes. "No body knows. I- I stayed with you ever since they brought you into my house. They were forced to treat my own wounds right here as I sat next to you, though mine were fairly minor compared to your injuries. The next day, they looked you over, but… But they said you'd… have only a few hours to live. I prayed that you would stay alive."

"You… prayed for me?" Ryo asked in disbelief.

"Umm… Yeah…" Tinaro replied shyly. "I didn't know what else to do. But I began to realize just how much you've done for me and just how much I needed you. How much I still need you…"

"Really?" Ryo was completely blown away by what she had just said. *Did she just say that she needs me? All right! That's almost like a 'I love you,' or something, right?* Ryo thought in excitement. *Get a hold of yourself, Ryo! Play it cool.* After taking a deep breath, Ryo was able to compose his thoughts and ask, "But what have I done? I haven't done anything *that* amazing. I was just being myself."

"But you've done more than you think. You helped me on that speech, right?"

"Well…" Ryo shrugged. "That wasn't…"

"If it wasn't for you I wouldn't have put that much effort into it."

"What?" Ryo said caught off guard. "You… The all-knowing, all-A Tinaro not putting effort into her work! That's hard to believe!" Ryo smiled and chuckled slightly.

Tinaro blushed and giggled at the compliment. "I'm not *all-knowing*. Besides, you helped me out with my schoolwork! You've been a big help to me! I don't know what I would have done without you helping me all these years."

"I… uh…" Ryo stammered as he felt his face flush bright red from embarrassment. He did not know what exactly to say in response, except, "You're welcome." Involuntarily, Ryo clenched his hand trying to hold back his emotions. However, the hand that he did clench was the one with Tinaro's hand in it. Ryo suddenly stiffened and slide his hand out of her's. He then turned his head away realizing what he just revealed.

"Are… Are you okay?" Tinaro asked sweetly.

"Umm…" came the quivering reply. "Ye-yeah… I'm fine. Never felt better. See I can even lean up…" Ryo said trying to lean upwards to prove it.

"No! Don't! You're still not… healed… yet…" Tinaro initially tried to lean Ryo back down but was stopped when she felt a warm, soothing energy waft over her. She was amazed to see that Ryo was able to sit up. It was said that he would survive, but now he was looking much better.

"I don't know… I feel fine…" Ryo grinned at her. *It worked! I was able to distract her from her question about my squeezing her hand.*

"Do you feel any pain?"

Ryo paused for a moment as if to do a mental scan of his body and came back with his answer: "Mmmm… No. Why?"

Tinaro's face construed in confusion and then a smiled gently crept onto her face. "Lean forward a bit…" she instructed. Ryo dutifully obeyed, but questioned her order. "I want to take a look at your back…" Ryo allowed the folds of the borrowed kimono wrapped around him to lose tension and slip down his back. What Tinaro saw made her audibly gasp.

"What?" Ryo asked alarmed. "What's wrong?"

"Um… Nothing. Your back is… fine. It looks perfectly normal."

"Good. And here I thought that something was wrong," Ryo chuckled to himself as he lifted his kimono shirt back up. Then he suddenly realized why she had gasped. *The burns from the melted blades! Are they…* Worry leapt into Ryo's throat, but he swallowed hard hoping to take his emotions down with his saliva. After all, he did not want to alert Tinaro any more than she already was. He was still trying to make sense of what happened that night. What *did* happen? Did it happen or was it all a bad dream?

Ryo cleared his thoughts as best as he could and leaned back down. Worrying about it now would not help anyone, especially Tinaro. He looked up into Tinaro's beautiful blue eyes but detected a slight apprehension.

"I guess I should be asking if you're okay."

"I'm fine. It's just…"

Ryo could almost see her inner struggle of trying to make sense of the past few days. With so many rumors floating

around about the assault and with the cleanup of the city and the treatment of the wounded, it was all a lot to take in. But after a brief moment of hesitation, Tinaro smiled and said, "…It's just, I'm glad to see that you are okay. It's a miracle. That's the only explanation."

"What are you talking about, Tinaro? A miracle?"

"I'm talking about you practically coming back from the dead!" Tinaro seemed to realize that she had raised her voice and calmed down. "All of the experts said that you only had about a day to live because of the amount of blood you had lost, the severe burns, as well as the poison that had been injected into your body! And yet, here you are, talking to me as if you were never injured."

"Except normally I wouldn't be in this house talking to you while I'm still in bed in clothes that aren't mine in a house that ain't mine. In fact, this is the first time I've been in your house but, you know, whatever…" Ryo said with a sly grin.

Tinaro smiled too. "Yeah! Anyways, I'm not sure exactly what happened but I'm glad that you're all right. You've… done so much for me that… that the thought of losing you… would be too much to bear."

Tinaro began to whimper and water began to form in the girl's eyes but this time Ryo leaned up out of his reclined position and wrapped his arms around the girl. Tinaro began to cry a little more and small streams of tears flowed down her cheeks. She cried into his shoulder for the longest time and Ryo just held her and stroked her hair.

Finally, Ryo spoke in his soft and soothing voice, "I'm glad that you're okay too. I don't want anything bad happening to you. I don't want to lose you either. I didn't then, and I don't now." Ryo paused for a moment to slyly inhale the

fresh fruit smelling aroma of her hair. *Intoxicating.* Ryo thought. *I love the smell of hair that smells like fruit.* Ryo smiled as he held her in his arms. "Thank you for taking care of me."

The female looked up into Ryo's big blue eyes and practically melted into his gaze. The look of love and a feeling of deep care showed all over his face. She had known him ever since he was thirteen. But she had never actually considered him as a potential mate. She viewed him just as a good friend. But now, there was something different stirring inside of her. Something that made her look at him in a different light.

In a small, sweet voice, she asked him a question that had bothered her for the past three days ever since the ambush. "Ryo. Tell me, why did you protect me and risk your own life in order to save mine?"

Ryo was caught off-guard by her question. *Because I love you*, he thought to himself. *Because I would do anything for you. You are special and deserved to be treated as such.*

None of his thoughts seemed to make things easier. He wanted to tell her just how he felt about her, but, even now when he was all alone with her, he still could not tell her how he really felt. Fear of rejection by this beauty loomed in his mind and it paralyzed him. He tried to form the words of his heart but they never came. The awkward silence was soon broken by Ryo's stumbling and stammering for the words to say.

"I…er…umm…well…You see, y-you mean a lot to me," Ryo mentally smacked himself. *That was intelligent, ya idiot!* "… and I couldn't stand the thought of someone hurting you. I

wanted more than anything to protect you from danger. I mean, just like the knights in those old stories did."

"Like a knight-in-shining-armor saving the fair maiden type of story…" Tinaro commented as she raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah! Exactly! I wanted to protect your honor, and stuff… I, uh, I was willing to fight to protect you. I was willing to die for you if that's what it took." Ryo was speaking so fast that he suddenly paused realizing what he had just said. His eyes widened in fear but, he stood firm in what he had said. "That… was, uh… *is* how far that I am willing to go."

"Ryo… I had no idea that you felt…" Tinaro began softly. Suddenly, a loud banging on the door cut her short. Both turned to see the door swing open and a tall male figure walk into the room where they were. He was dressed in the traditional soldier outfit and his steel armor shimmered from the light cast by the sun from the nearby window. He was an imposing sight to behold and his skills with the blade were top notch.

He briefly glanced at the scene before him not even breaking a smile. He strode to Tinaro and he spoke quietly in her ear. "Can I talk to you outside for a moment?"

She looked back at the speaker realizing that it was Tyson. She looked back at Ryo who proceeded to nod his head and say, "It's okay. I'll be fine. Don't worry." He then motioned for her to leave and continued with a smile, "Go on. It seems as if you are needed. Besides, I don't think that I'm going anyway anytime soon. I need my rest."

Tinaro nodded her head and turned toward Tyson. As they left, Tyson gave a sudden but swift glance at the teen resting comfortably in the bed. Ryo would have missed it,

but his focus left Tinaro for a moment to notice the discontenting glare from the soldier. The door was then shut.

Something's not right... Ryo thought. Instead of resting like he should have, Ryo carefully got out of bed and scuttled stealthily toward the door, hoping to overhear the conversation that apparently was only intended for Tinaro. The pain he had once felt seemed to be almost completely gone, one thing that Ryo was thankful for.

As he approached the door, he began to hear the familiar voice of Tinaro and the voice of the soldier Tyson. The sounds were muffled, but he could hear them none the less. But it seemed more quiet than any typical conversation. Almost as if they were whispering. Ryo placed his ear to the door and was able to eavesdrop on their conversation. The conversation had already begun and Tyson was already in mid-response to an apparent statement from the charming Tinaro about Ryo's condition.

"No burns? Are you sure?"

"Yeah! I saw him myself. He seems almost completely healed! Isn't that great?"

Tyson paused figuring out a way to say what he had to say. He did not want to douse her enthusiasm, but she needed to hear what he had to tell her. "Listen to me. For your own safety, I can't allow you to be around him anymore."

"What? What are you sayi…"

"That kid is dangerous! Did you see what he did to those guys a few days ago?"

"Umm… No, why?"

"The investigation department reported that it looked like some kind of bomb exploded in the area where you guys were found. However, numerous reports indicate that those people didn't even use bombs! And the magnitude of the blast radius…"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that it's a miracle that he's still alive and that, according to you, he bears no evidence of burns from the explosion! There's something about him that's not right, can't you see that!" Tyson realized that he had raised his voice and took a deep breath to calm himself. He brought his voice back down to a whisper. "We found on either side of the explosion two charred bodies that have been identified as two of the assassins. They were so badly burned that they barely looked human. At this point, the police force highly doubts that there was any friendly fire involved because there were no type of bombs or explosives on any of the other ninja bodies recovered. Using things like that would have ruined their element of surprise. But if Ryo had some kind of bomb and used it against them, then why doesn't he have any burns on his body?"

"Well… umm…"

"There were also found multiple swords without blades. It looked like the blades were melted away by extreme heat. Steel does not melt that easily. I'm telling you, there's no telling what he'll do next! There's no other way to say it: Ryo is a threat to our city."

"Wait just a minute! A threat?" Tinaro's voice shrieked. "He's no threat! He protected me when I thought that I was going to be killed! I owe him my life!" Tinaro countered rather loudly, appalled that he would say that Ryo was a threat.

"Shhhhhh… Not so loud…" Tyson whispered quiet loudly. He sighed and warily looked at the closed door where Ryo was "resting" hoping that the boy had not heard anything. Satisfied by the silence, Tyson looked back at Tinaro. "I'm sorry, but orders are orders…" Tyson murmured somewhat regretfully. He then caught himself as he spoke his last words. The look of alarm on the soldier's face to what he had said was quickly dissipated, but it did not go unnoticed.

"What do you mean? What orders?" Tinaro pressed for the information that had just now slipped from Tyson's lips.

"Hmm? Never mind. It's nothing," Tyson said trying to dodge the question.

But as with any curious, beautiful female, Tinaro rendered his attempt futile thanks to her wiles which is something instilled into every woman.

"Tyson, what's going on? Please. Tell me." Tinaro begged with her eyes ever so big and ever so pleading that she could make them. He quivered at her truly pathetic look and with a roll of his eyes he reluctantly addressed the matter.

"All right, but…" Tyson waved his finger in front of him. "I'll have to whisper it in your ears so that no one else can hear." He cautiously looked around and purposefully waited to make sure that the area was secure and that no one would be listening in to what he had to say.

Ryo strained his ear against the door trying desperately to hear what Tyson was about to say. Unfortunately, if he was going to say something in her ears then it would be nigh impossible to hear. Suddenly, something seemed to tug at the back of his mind like a dormant thought coming to the forefront of his mind. It seemed like a little voice. And it seemed to echo in his mind: *Reach out with your mind and*

feel your environment around you. Focus on your Jupiter element. Ryo looked around the room confused.

What was that? He wondered mentally.

Again the voice seemed to speak with him. *Concentrate on the wind currents...*

Ryo shook his head. *I must be going crazy. I'm either talking to myself or I'm hearing voices in my head, neither of which are a good sign. But still, I would like to know what Tyson has to say.* Ryo closed his eyes and concentrated hard on trying to hear the conversation on the other side of the door. A brief moment passed and suddenly Ryo felt different somehow, almost light headed. He could feel the gentle whispers of the airflow in his room. Ryo concentrated even more as he let his senses follow a trail of air that flowed underneath the door. Then he heard it. It was faint at first, but Ryo focused on the tingle in the air. *Is that breathing?* His question went unanswered as he soon became aware of the gentle whispers of a man's voice. It went something like this: "I have orders from my superiors to arrest Ryo and have him tried for crimes against the city."

"WHAT!" Tinaro yelled.

Ryo on the other end of the door jumped back surprised by the sudden outburst. He soon resumed his post and listened further with widened eyes and with a heart that beat faster and faster as the moments passed.

Tinaro could not believe what she had just heard. "Ryo's not a criminal! He hasn't even done anything wrong!"

Tyson quickly placed his hand on her mouth and shushed her. "Shhhhhh! You're not supposed to know these things."

She removed his hand from her mouth. "These 'things'? Is there's more?" she asked in utter shock. What more could be brought against Ryo's report.

"Ugh…" Tyson sighed in anguish. *The captain will have my head for sure.* He thought. "Well, yeah, but please! Will you keep your voice down?" He paused to listen if anyone had heard the girl's exclamation. His eyes fell upon the door where Ryo was and casually took a step toward it to hear any sort of ruffling of the bedding. After he was satisfied, he continued speaking in his quieted tone. "We've received an anonymous tip saying that Ryo was the cause of the attack. We weren't sure at first but after receiving a second tip saying about the same thing, we have no choice but to look into the matter."

"But, he didn't do it, Tyson," Tinaro pleaded on Ryo's behalf.

"That may be the case, but until further notice, Ryo is under house arrest and will await further interrogation. If we find out that he was involved, he could face imprisonment, exile, or even death."

"'If he was involved'? What are you saying…? He's not being accused of the attack on our city two days ago, is he?" Tinaro quizzed with surprise intermingled in her voice.

"The first tip we received indicated that Ryo was the cause of the attack. But the second tip that we got claimed that a Ryouto Yanjan was the one responsible for the assault on our city. We don't have much to go by so we have to explore every possibility. I think right now he's being charged some minor damage. But he may also be charged with the deaths of those who were killed in the attack. I'm sorry. But my orders were to 'bring in the suspect at all costs so that he

may be investigated and tried for his crimes if convicted,'" Tyson recited as if he was reading his orders.

"Minor damage…?" Tinaro asked confused.

"Umm… Fire damage…" he answered bluntly.

"So that explosion is something you guys are trying to pin on him!" Tinaro accused.

"There's nothing set in stone… yet… However, Ryo is not allowed to leave the city. If he tries then he will be charged with the assault and tried for his crimes. For now, my orders are to wait until he is fully conscious and then take him into custody."

"No! This isn't fair! He was defending my life…" Tinaro trailed off, shocked at this new revelation. Her mouth gaped open and she leaned up heavily against the wall due to the shock and sheer magnitude of the crimes charged to Ryo's account. *How could they do this? Who would accuse him of such things?*

On the other side of the door, Ryo covered his gaping mouth with his hands and backed away from the door slightly. Sweat dripped from his body. *I haven't done anything…* He thought shocked at the accusations. In fact, he had **saved** a life. He should not be tried for crimes he did not commit; but rather, he should be lifted up as a hero for the life that still yet lives because of his efforts!

The thought of running away crossed his mind as his eyes fell upon the nearby open window. *If I try to run then they'll take me in. But if I stay here then they'll still take me in anyways. Hmmm.* The voices outside of the door continued again, instantly drawing Ryo closer to it. Listening intently, Ryo readied himself for what was said next.

"Are you… g-going to t-take him now?" Tinaro sniffled, tears streamed down her face. She had almost lost Ryo once and now she was threatened with the loss of him once again. It was too much for her to bear.

Tyson looked at the trembling body before him and gave her a warm, loving smile. She obviously cared for Ryo more than what she had made evident before. "Here." He reached in his satchel and pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to her.

She accepted it and wiped the tears from her beautiful, tear-stained face. After she blew her nose, she looked pleadingly into his dark brown eyes hoping that he would answer her.

Tyson, the hardened soldier that he had become after his combat training, was not able to resist the assault of the beautiful female's gaze into his eyes. It was so intense that he had to avert his eyes away from her because as she looked upon him, her gaze pierced his soul and her emotions were clearly evident that if he would have denied her request, any chance of spending time with her would be out of the question. And with feelings he could not deny, he wanted nothing more than to give her more time. But he could not defy his orders. It might cost him his job.

He gave her question considerable thought and he finally came to a decision and relented to her request, even if that decision meant delaying the orders given to him by his superiors. If it meant that he had any chance of having a future with her by delaying his capture of Ryo then he was willing to do it. He would merely say that Ryo was unable to move or something.

"I tell you what. I'll give you the rest of today. But tonight, I'm coming for him."

Tinaro's eyes lit up at his generosity, but Tyson raised one finger indicating that he was adding in one more stipulation. "I'll only do this if, and only if, you do not tell him what I have told you. The moment he knows, then I'll be forced to take him into custody. All right?"

Gratefully, Tinaro wrapped her arms around him in a big hug with her fingers crossed behind her back and replied, "Thank you, Tyson. I owe you one. I promise that I will not tell him, no matter how hard it gets. Thanks again." She released him from her hug and smiled. She was about walk back into the room where Ryo was but was stopped by Tyson.

"Hold on… Don't make it look you were crying. I don't know what he'll think but if he thinks that something is wrong with you, then I may have to detain him right now." Tinaro wiped her eyes and face with Tyson's handkerchief and handed it back to him. After gaining his approval that she looked fine, Tinaro reached for the door handle to spend what could quite possibly be the last moments that she and Ryo would spend together.

Ryo, who was on the other side of the door, heard everything and was moved with compassion by what Tinaro had done for him. He was also moved with rage at such outrageous charges. However, he now had a bigger problem on his hands. The authorities wanted him and, for whatever reason, they wanted to take him out quietly. This was evidenced by the fact that only one soldier was sent to take him into custody.

I have until tonight before they will come for me. I don't know what's going on, but one thing is certain, they will take me into custody and I may never find out who attacked our city. I'm not about to stay here and wait this thing out. Ryo thought to himself as he slowly traveled to the bed and lay

down. *Why would they make false accusations towards me anyway? But also, who would do such a thing. This makes no sense to me at all.*

Just then the door opened and Tinaro walked in the room beaming with her usual bright and cheerful smile. Ryo caught a glimpse of Tyson who seemed to be smiling at him. Tinaro turned her back on Ryo and made eye contact with Tyson who nodded as she shut the door rather slowly. *Was he… smiling?* Ryo wondered. He then turned his attention to Tinaro who looked just a little bit shaken. *She won't tell me, even if I ask. I'd better be prepared to make a midnight run tonight. But I'll have to keep my plans for tonight a secret even from her. But, what would I need?*

"Is everything okay?" Ryo asked, trying to get confirmation on what he already knew.

Tinaro wanted to warn Ryo so bad that it hurt. But she knew that if she enlightened Ryo with the news now that he would certainly be captured by Tyson and interrogated immediately. She would probably also be captured and sentenced for helping a criminal. However, his punishment loomed in her mind, but she made a promise and intended to keep it. At least until she could tell him secretly. So for the moment, she lied to him.

"Ohh. Everything's fine. Tyson just asked me if everything's alright and told me that the police are still investigating the cause of the attack," she said with her back still facing him. She could not look at Ryo in the eyes for very long and openly lie to him. Instead, she faced the door and glared through the door almost as if she could see exactly what the soldier was doing… listening. *I'll tell him when I know that the soldiers won't be around to hear me tell him.* Tinaro

thought to herself. She then turned around and smiled at Ryo.

I knew it. But I do respect her for keeping her word. I'll need to get some supplies stocked before I leave tonight. And I'll need some new clothes and armor, if I can find any, and I'll need to get a sword. A real one. Ryo stroked his chin as he soon became lost in his own thoughts. *I wonder if they confiscated any swords from that night. Tinaro might know something of it. A weapon must be the first thing I get.*

"Hey, Tinaro…"

The day seemed to drag itself out until it had finally began to darken. The sky shimmered with the colors of the setting sun over the horizon. A cool gentle wind blew in from the sea, wafting the city in the sweet smell of fresh air. All that was distinguishable by ear was the soft shuffle of feet as a few people made their way back to their homes.

The sun lowered itself past the horizon and the light it gave to the city of Cyril slowly faded. The empty streets soon became gloomy and shadows cropped up around the buildings nearby. These dark shadows offered concealment to any who would find shelter in the comfort of the dimness. But most of the citizens were already in their homes and would not roam the streets. Typically, only the soldiers would walk the streets at night to keep an eye out for potential danger. This normally would be a good thing any other nights other than tonight.

A figure, dressed in a long dark robe, stealthily scuttled from shadow to shadow to avoid human contact of any kind. His violet handled swords rested comfortably at his waist with the strap of the sheath of the larger sword slung across his body and resting on his right shoulder. The smaller blade

was tucked in his belt and was just as secure. Both swords were hidden from view due to the fact that the hooded figure firmly grasped the front of the robe fairly tightly around his body.

His blond hair swayed in the breeze created by his hasty movements. But the hood on his robe covered his head effectively so as to hide any light color in his dark environment that would give his position away, especially to any soldiers. Any color from his hands and arms were concealed beneath the length of the sleeves. The robe was long enough to even cover his sturdy, reliable leather boots.

Ducking behind one of the city's inns, he peered around the corner to his ending destination, the city gate and eventually past that. Much to his dismay, the exit to the city was guarded by four men clad in shining steel armor. They were armed with spears and a sword which was sheathed by their side. Two more soldiers paced past the gate and then disappeared from sight. A few torches lit up the area just enough to see where one was going.

I count at least six guards. He thought to himself. *But there may be more. However, my quarrel is not with them. I don't want to hurt them, but I will do what I must.* He stroked the handle of his blade but left it sheathed. *I wonder if I can sneak past them somehow.*

The young man crouched down and continued to scope out the landscape, trying to find some way where he could easily sneak past the soldiers or distract them so he could make a dash for the exit. But before he could act, a new figure marched towards the other soldiers and spoke to them. Unfortunately, the concealed man was unable to discern what was being notified to the other soldiers. Then surprisingly, all the soldiers started to leave quickly with the

taller man. Upon closer inspection, the blond man recognized the lead man as the one called Tyson and then made an educated guess as to where everyone was going.

Now's my chance. I'm more than sure that they are heading off to arrest me. Won't it be a surprise when I'm not there? Carefully watching the party disappear, the robed man waited until he was sure that he could make it out of the city successfully. Then, when he was sure, he made his move. Slithering along the wall of the inn, he sneaked to the end of the inn wall. He continued to sidle to the gate and was nearly there when suddenly a voice called out from behind him.

"Hey! Who's there? Ryo? Is that you?"

Ryo froze in mid-stride and dread instantly gripped his heart. He feared that his midnight run would be stopped short. He turned around to see a young lady holding a small lamp in her hand. She held it up to her face and Ryo instantly recognized the countenance of his pursuer.

"Tinaro! What are you doing out here?" Ryo asked surprised, pulling back his hood. He ran up to her, but also kept a wary eye for any potential danger.

"Ryo. I'm sorry. I should have told you. But if I would have with Tyson right there…" She began to articulate her struggle with telling him the truth, but emotion of lament filled her words and she began to whimper and was unable to continue. She lowered her head trying to conceal her tears.

"It's okay." Ryo reached his hand to her face gently caressing her chin and lifted her head to meet his eyes. "I understand. You gave your word and I respect you for that."

But I wasn't going to keep my word. Tinaro thought to herself.

Ryo continued. "I've always respected you. I've looked to you for strength and guidance and friendship. You've done so much for me that I don't know how to repay you. Thank you for being one of the few who cared for me. But now, I have to leave."

Ryo turned to leave as he said he must but a hand on his shoulder prevented his advancement of freedom into the darkness of the night.

"I don't want you to go. Please, stay," Tinaro begged the blond haired man as she began to feel her eyes well up with tears.

With his back turned to the girl, he sighed and responded quietly, "No, I can't. I won't stay. I'm sorry. For whatever reason, I've been set up and I want to know why. I need to know who gave the police false information."

"Huh? Did you hear what Tys…?"

"Yeah, I did. I heard everything that Tyson told you." Ryo turned around to face the girl. "That's why I can't just sit around and let them 'investigate' these lies. Somebody wants me behind bars or worse and I need to know who and why."

"But if you leave then it will make you look even more guilty! They'll charge you with the attack! Don't you see, it's safer to just stay here!" Tinaro pleaded the tears now streaming down her cheeks.

"That… may be… but…" Ryo exhaled and thought his next words carefully. "I don't think that I want to come back."

"What? Why? Why don't you *want* to come back? Ryo, tell me." Tinaro gave a look of surprise and finished in anguish as she gripped his arm.

Ryo bowed his head and closed his eyes as if he were in a deep meditation. He thought for a moment and answered her in a low, dark tone. "I'm not very liked in this city."

"That's not true!" Tinaro countered. "You are very liked! I like you…" Tinaro stopped immediately and gasped at what she just admitted.

"Really?" Ryo's heart leapt within his breast as he made eye contact with his longtime crush. *Did she… just say what I thought she said?*

"Umm… Yeah…" Tinaro replied sheepishly.

Ryo finally had his chance, and for once, he would take it. He took in a deep breath and continued, "To tell you the truth, I've liked you for the longest time. But I just couldn't seem to tell you. I guess that I was afraid that you wouldn't feel the same towards me. It's actually very reassuring, and yet, very… vexing."

Confusion instantly construed Tinaro's face, but Ryo put a finger on her lips to silence her response. "Listen. I've… spent the majority of the afternoon debating whether or not I should go. To be honest, the only reason I could see to stay was to be with you. However, I… I… just couldn't allow you to be associated with a criminal."

"But you're not…"

"Either way," Ryo interrupted, "If I stay or if I go, I would be looked at like a criminal. And that was a burden that I didn't want you to have to bear as well. Which is why I came to the

decision that I have. I think that you should… forget about me…"

"No! I can't! I don't care what they call you…"

"…But I care, what they call you. Tinaro, liste…"

Hands suddenly wrapped around Ryo's head and before he knew it, his lips were pressed against the soft lips of Tinaro. Being taken completely by surprise, Ryo's eyes were still open as his mind finally caught up with what happened. His heart rate increased dramatically and he soon relaxed into the kiss and returned Tinaro's fierce embrace. Ryo was at a loss of words. Nothing he could imagine could describe that intimate moment that he shared with her. They parted lips and their eyes met. Both were still embraced in each other's arms.

"Can't I convince you to stay?" Tinaro asked alluringly.

For a brief moment, Ryo reconsider his decision that a moment ago he was so set in doing. The taste of her lips, the feel of her body against his, the warmth of her embrace — all of these things seemed to try to deter him from his goal. For a brief moment, he considered the possibility of what it would be like to stay and to be with Tinaro.

"I…" his voice croaked less sure than it was a moment ago. He smiled weakly. "I would love too… if I wasn't being labeled as a criminal. I care too much for you to let you throw your life away because of me. I'm… going…"

Ryo lifted his head and with watering eyes he said, "But, if I can, I'll come back. I promise. I will not let your friendship pass from my mind or my heart. Now, please. I must go. And… don't try to stop me." Ryo lifted his hood above his

head and was about to turn around to leave when Tinaro reached up and grabbed his arm.

Tinaro gazed into his aqua blue one last time and gave him a sheepish smile. This would most likely be the last time that she would see him again. She studied his handsome face one last time and tried to imprint his features in her mind. Then, she leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "Good luck," she whispered. Her grip on his arm loosened and he slowly turned toward the gate. A short moment passed when suddenly Ryo spun around and embraced Tinaro in a loving embrace and kissed her passionately on the lips.

Tinaro was caught off guard by his sudden action but soon accepted his kiss and wrapped her arms around his slender, yet muscular body. She then felt something about him that she had not noticed about him before. She felt, in that moment of intimacy, the pure and deep love and compassion that Ryo had for her and his true reason for risking his life for hers. He had the greatest type of love: one so strong that he would lay down his life for her.

As their lips parted, Ryo gazed into Tinaro's sweet and innocent eyes one last time. He reached up and wiped away her tears with his hands, feeling the soft, supple touch of her cheeks.

"There's no need to cry for me. Remember, I made you a promise." Ryo looked up and saw the flicker of lights coming closer and closer. Ryo gazed one last time at the girl as if taking a mental picture and slowly backed away. This time, he turned towards the open fields beyond the city and departed. His pace was slow at first, but then he quickened his pace to a sprint fearing that if he looked back at that lovely, celestial beauty he would be compelled to stay.

His departure from the city and from his long time crush was the hardest thing that he had ever done. The tears that had started to well up in his eyes before came streaming down his cheeks. His vision blurred as the rush of air passed over his face as he left his crush, his woman, his love standing behind him perhaps for forever. He began to question his decision and every decision, for that matter, that he had ever made in his life up to that point. He had to leave right? It *seemed* like the logical choice. But he did not *want* to leave. The prime reason he was reluctant to leave was the ravishing Tinaro.

Just the thought of her made his heart quiver. As much as he wanted to stay and be with her, he had an equal desire to keep on living. And he was sure that if he stayed that he would, for some reason, be convicted of these crimes and killed for them. He had an unsettling feeling that he would be killed. It was just an intuitive feeling that he had. He had been right on his instincts on past experiences so why should this sense be any different from the others? Ryo was not going to take his chances and wait around. His life now became one of an exile and a wanderer seeking answers where he did not know where to find them.

Tinaro watched on with tears in her eyes as Ryo dashed off into the night with the realization that this was the last time that she would see Ryo. She hated to say good-bye to anyone and Ryo's departure was a hard issue to deal with. She watched intently as he finally passed the city's gate, hoping that he would change his mind and come back. But, unfortunately, he did not change his mind and his silhouette soon became camouflaged with the night terrain.

A saddened Tinaro watched for a few more moments past the gate promisingly before deciding to go back home. The moment she turned around, however, she was greeted by

the sight of one tall strapping, dark-haired young man dressed in a soldier's outfit. Tyson. And behind him were the many soldiers that were ready to arrest Ryo.

"You there! You're under…" Tyson stated commandingly but soon realized that it was not Ryo. "Oh… Tinaro, what are you doing out here at this time of night?"

"I just came outside for some fresh air," Tinaro lied as she faked stretching out trying to hide the fact that she had been crying. "I couldn't sleep and I thought that a walk around would help tire me out so I could sleep." She wiped her face in an effort conceal any evidence that would contradict her statement.

"Is that so?" Tyson was having a difficult time in believing her. "It doesn't look like you were trying to sleep seeing as you are still dressed in your clothes from earlier."

Tinaro froze in realization that he was right. She had not changed since he had seen her earlier in the day. She had to think of something fast. An idea suddenly struck her. *I need a diversion to take away his suspicion of me. I know!* Tinaro suddenly collapsed to the ground, making sure that she did not hurt herself as she "fell."

"Tinaro!" Tyson yelled and rushed to her side. He caught her as she started to collapse and checked to see if she was alive. He felt a pulse but something just did not seem right about this whole situation. He then turned to the other soldiers, "Keep searching the city until you find him. I'm gonna take her back to her house." He then turned to the "unconscious" form of Tinaro and smiled. His smile was suddenly changed and he looked up toward the city gate. *Ryo, you may have gotten away this time but next time you won't be so lucky. We'll find you. I promise you that.*

The dark hooded silhouette of the short-haired blond teen known as Ryo slowly faded from viewing distance of the city of Cyril. He had been walking for quite some time, hours perhaps, but it did not seem like he was getting any close to his next destination. He was huddled more than usual as if he bore a heavy burden. His arms and hands, concealed by the large sleeves of the coat, rested closely in front of his person in an attempt to stay warm on this particularly cold night.

Light began to shine down from the sky and he looked up to see that the moon had finally been freed of the cloud barricade that had concealed its light. However, when Ryo looked up, all of the emotions that he had been carrying with him for the past many years began to manifest themselves. Tears rolled from his eyes onto his cheeks as he gazed at the brilliance of the moon.

He began reminiscing on his past experiences and he remembered something that one of the ninjas had said to him. "*It's you! You're the one! Ryouto Yanjan!*" Had they come just for him? Had someone hired them to take him out? If so, then why him? Ryo was thoroughly confused by the whole matter.

Tinaro crossed his mind time and again and he longed to see her just one more time so that he could express his feelings to her. He gazed at the moon for the longest time, basking in the comfort he found in the pale light and the relative darkness when suddenly a long and ominous howling filled the silence of the night.

What was that? It sounded close too. Ryo halted his movements and reached for his katana. His eyes shifted from side to side scrutinizing the landscape, looking for potential danger. The howling came closer but no animals

showed themselves in the dim light of the moon. Ryo began to get nervous due to the lack of light and the proximity of the ravenous monsters.

If I stay here, then I'm sure to be caught by them. My map showed that the city of Kalay is nearby. If I can make it there, then I'll be safe for the night.

Ryo secured his belongings and then suddenly dashed as fast as he could toward where Kalay should be. Dodging the various trees and rocks which speckled the landscape, Ryo began to hear the faint pitter-patter of feet from his animal pursuers. After a few more moments of running, Ryo began to see the tops of the buildings of Kalay.

I finally made it to Kalay. Only a few more minutes and I'll be there. I'll be able to rest for the night and have a good meal in the morning and then head out. Ryo burst from the forest out into the open landscape with incredible speed as he was spurred on by what awaited him in the city. He was nearly there when suddenly a lone wolf that he had heard earlier skidded in the dirt right in front of him. The beast snarled at him with his vicious teeth dripping with a blood lust to kill.

Ryo stopped suddenly, his feet sliding in the dirt as dust rose up around his feet from his sudden stop. He dropped his extra baggage and reached for his blade. He started to breathe heavier and he felt his pulse quicken. But he kept his eye on the animal waiting for him to strike. Suddenly, more wolves emerged from the darkness. The wolves began to form a circle until the blond teen was surrounded by the hungry, snarling monsters.

Crap. Not good. He thought to himself. *What do I do now?*

As if in answer to his question, the lead wolf charged in and leapt to unbelievable heights to pounce down on Ryo.

However, Ryo was not quite ready to counter attack. He darted forward and rolled underneath the airborne creature but despite his evasive roll he was still caught in the back by its sharp claws.

The flesh was ripped away from his back and blood oozed from the wound. Ryo knelt in pain and tried to keep a sharp eye on the rest of the beasts. He glanced back at the wolf who then side stepped and leapt once more into the air. This time he was ready. Ryo rolled in the dirt towards the aerial wolf and quickly stood to a kneeling position and unsheathed his sword in one smooth motion. His blade and arm were extended in a pose as the unfortunate animal fell to the earth cleaved in two. The other wolves seemed to be in shock but one decided to go for it. The wolf charged at him but Ryo side-stepped and leapt over the animal with his sword down which effectively ending that creature's life.

He was feeling fairly confident when suddenly Ryo felt another slashing pain across his lower back. Ryo spun around with his blade in front of him but hit nothing. He collapsed to his knees and looked up to see the wolf glaring at him with a sort of smile, if one was possible on a wolf.

Ryo felt the anger and hatred well up inside of him until he could not take it anymore. Raising his outstretched hand to the wolf, Ryo summoned all of his anger to attack the ravenous beast. Suddenly, a blue aura surrounded his body and small fireballs appeared from his outstretched hand and rained down upon the animal. A few moments later, the assault stopped and the chard body of a wolf lay lifeless on the ground. Ryo stood up and faced the other wolves. The wolves looked at each other and seemed to communicate the same thing. They then turned and scampered back into the darkness from where they came.

Once the wolves disappeared from sight, Ryo looked at his hand in wonder. *What was that?* He slowly walked back to where he had dropped his things. *That makes twice. What's going on with me?* Just as he bent down to grab his stuff, a pain shot up his back. *I had better hurry to the city and try to get some help for my wounds.* With that, Ryo grabbed his gear, sheathed his sword, and limped off to the city of Kalay.

Chapter 5: Ch 3: Call Me, Knight

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"Where is he?" the captain asked pounding his fist into the wooden table. The roomful of police and security looked at each other uneasily. They had been searching all night for their escapee. "Where is Ryo? Does anyone have a report!"

One of the men, Tyson, stood up and addressed the matter in his usual formal manner. "Ummm… Sir, my company and I checked everywhere in town last night and if he were still here then we would have found him already. The only explainable answer to his disappearance is that he left town sometime last night."

"Gee. No kidding. How? I thought that he was unconscious for the past few days! How would he be able to get up and run away without a trace?" the captain asked in a harsh tone, staring at Tyson and glancing at some of the other officers.

"I went to check on him earlier yesterday to see his condition and discovered that he was awake and conscious but not fully mobile. He was with a nurse friend who wanted to spend the rest of the day with him to monitor his progress. Ryo must have gone home that night and then left before any of us knew what had happened. His friend knew nothing of his plans to leave."

"Well, I want him found. I've been authorized to use any means necessary to bring Ryo in. And I intend to. I've sent out details of his description to nearby cities and towns about a generous bounty for the capture of Ryo. The party who captures Ryo alive will be paid 10,000 coins; and,

information leading to his capture will be rewarded with half that amount."

The men in the room looked at each other and murmured amongst themselves the steep bounty for the capture of this teenage kid. The hushed chatter soon became slightly louder as they began to discuss louder about the steep bounty.

"Quiet down! I have new assignments for all of you!" The captain turned around and reached for a rolled up piece of paper and opened it up. "What the…?" He looked at the paper hoping to see the map of the continent only to discover a blank page filled with these words which he read aloud: "I'm sorry that I took your map, but frankly, I need it more than you do. Thanks. Signed, Ryouto Yanjan."

Anger flooded down into the captain's hands and he quickly crumpled the paper and tossed it aside. "He took our map! That's it! Tyson, take your company south to the city of Kalay and bring him in! Johnson, take your men and head north to Vault and check the surrounding cities. I want the rest of you to head west to Tolbi to check the area for him. We will bring him in and make him regret ever plotting against our city! Dismissed!"

"Sir, are you okay?" One of the inn maidens of the Kalay inn gently rapped on the door of one of the rooms. She was told that a young man with severe back injuries checked in late last night and that he might need some assistance. "This is room service. Is everything okay? Sir?"

"I'm fine," a male voice answered from the other side of the door.

"Umm… Breakfast will be served soon. Are you sure that you don't need any help?" The young maiden was unsure who

this mysterious man was. But, she was told that he was armed and that he had an encounter with the local wildlife. The inn keeper told her that he was most likely a warrior headed to the city of Tolbi for the Colosso tournament that would be held in the late Lord Babi's honor soon. Caution was expressed to her in what she did.

"Nah. I don't need any help. But thanks anyways."

The inn-maiden paused for a moment and then continued on with her duties. On the other side of the door, Ryo sat on his bed and examined his katana. He stretched out his back underneath the clothing that had requested and thought back to when he first arrived.

Once he had arrived at the inn, he requested a room, bandages, and fresh clothing. The clothes, he was told, were imbued with a mysterious power that would help him win the Colosso tournament. Apparently, the innkeeper thought that he was some kind of warrior entering the tournament. Ryo said no more than he had to, graciously accepted the gift, and went to his room to dress his wounds. Once that was done, he fell into a deep, yet restless sleep.

These beds aren't like mine... Ryo sighed as he gently stroked the sheets. *I can't believe I'm here now, on my own.* Ryo reached behind him to scratch his back and noticed that the sting of the wounds he had suffered had disappeared. As he began to removed the blood stained bandages, he felt no gashes in his back anymore from his encounter with the wolves. *Hmph. That's interesting.* Ryo stood up and went over to the bathroom and looked in the mirror to confirm what he already knew. His wounds were completely healed. He didn't quite understand how it happened he was just glad that he was better. It would make it easier to move. Ryo

moved back to the bed, sat down, and began to figure out a strategy of what he would do next and where he would go.

"I can't stay in town long." He moved to his pack and pulled out the map that he "borrowed" from his city.

He began to scan for the closest cities, however, they were quite far away. Ryo looked at the closest city of Tolbi which was across the Karagol Sea, but he realized that the people from his city would probably look there first after Kalay, of course. He then scanned the map and saw a small town north and east of his position called Vault. This city was a potential place but it still was relatively close to Cyril and probably would be searched.

"I don't have much money with me so that presents another problem…"

A rumbling was heard and it startled Ryo but he soon realized that his stomach was responsible for the noise. "However, my stomach presents the more pertinent problem," he said with a quiet chuckle as he gently rubbed his belly. He packed up his map in his backpack and grabbed the shorter sword and girded it to his belt. He would not leave his room without some means to protect himself. Ryo then proceeded to put his shirt on over his healed wounds.

"I'll search for a good place later. Right now I need to eat to keep up my strength." As he was about to leave, he glanced at his sword which rested on his bed. "Hopefully, I won't need to use that on anyone. But if I have to, I will." He walked over towards the bed and then hid the katana underneath the pillows and when he was satisfied that no one could see it, he left to go eat.

He descended the stairs and turned the corner to the dining area. He sat down and a few short moments later, one of the inn workers set a plate of food before him. He thanked her and began to devour his food. The door of the inn opened and two men walked into the building. One of them wore what seemed to be fairly expensive robes probably made of silk. The purple and green colors of his garments blended together adequately to yield an effect that was pleasant to look at. This man was obviously a merchant or a wealthy business person.

The other man behind the elegantly dress merchant wore an outfit not as elegant as the other man's robes. His outfit was more faded and dust ridden with the hem of his pants torn in places and tattered everywhere else. This man was obviously the bodyguard of the wealthy man. The one thing that stood out to Ryo about this man was the long rod he carried with him. The silvery glow that reflected from the weapon revealed that it was well taken care of. This man's rough-looking features were evidence enough that he was most likely the bodyguard of the merchant.

They walked past the table where Ryo sat and the bodyguard gave him a quick look over, scanning to detect possible danger. Silently passing by, both men sat down a table away from Ryo. The merchant seemed to be enjoying his time in town while the other one seemed to be disgruntled and was constantly looking around.

The men began speaking in a slightly hushed tone, yet still loud enough for Ryo to overhear. "Is the cargo safe?" the merchant asked.

"Preparations are nearly complete. The ship is in peak condition and there's nothing to worry about," the gruff man replied as he continued to gaze around the area, his staff

within grasp. "With the private dock southeast of here we should be able to leave within the hour."

Ryo began to feel uneasiness settle into his stomach, and it wasn't the food. Something in the air sent a chill down his spine and almost compelled him to leave. But something about their conversation interested him. Even still, he felt uneasy. Ryo quickly got up from his table and left for his room, but he overheard the merchant talking to his guard as he left. "Excellent! We'll finally head for the town of Xian so I can trade all of my wares for the silk and…"

The merchant's talk faded as Ryo ascended the stairs. After each step, Ryo began to get a more and more sinking feeling. *What is this feeling? What's going on?* When Ryo finally got to the top of the steps, he heard voices that sounded quite familiar. "Check every room!" one of them commanded. "We must find him at all costs!"

Tyson! Ryo instantly backed against a wall just in time to hear the steady beats of footsteps walking past in the adjacent hallway. *They're here already! I need to grab my stuff and leave ASAP!* The young man looked around the corner for his opening to move.A smile found its way in the corner of his mouth as he thought of the many stories he read about ninja's using stealth to sneak past enemies. Now, it was his turn to practice what he'd read. Who said reading wasn't informative? *Here's where the fun begins.*

With the stealth and the remarkable speed of any well-trained ninja, Ryo dashed around the corner and swiftly made it to the room where his stuff was stored. He turned the handle and slipped into his room undetected. *So far so good.* Ryo thought. He grabbed his things and was ready within a minute. He was about to head out when there came a heavy knocking at the door. The knocking was so hard that

Ryo jumped in fright and almost thought the door would become dislodged from the hinges.

"Is anyone in there? This is the Cyril military. We are looking for a young man named Ryo," the soldier called out from the other side of the door. Ryo was desperately trying to devise a plan of escape when an idea struck him.

I don't recognize this soldier's voice. Hmmm. I wonder if I could get away with saying that I'm someone else. If worse comes to worse, I'll knock him out with my sword. This would be easier if it was darker in here. Ryo quickly moved to the window and closed the curtains to hinder the light of Sol from seeping into the room.

The door began to rattle more violently than before. "If someone is in here, watch out, 'cause I'm coming in!"

It was now or never. Ryo messed his hair up to seem like he had just woken up and then took a deep breath and opened the door slightly. "Yes? May I help you, sir?" Ryo said, attempting to disguise his normal voice slightly by deepening it. The light from the hall illuminated only half of his face. The rest was concealed in darkness.

The soldier took a good look at the small portion of Ryo that was visible. Ryo was nervous that he would be caught in his lie… his ploy. This soldier must have been new because Ryo did not recognize his face but he could not help but be a little nervous. The soldier asked in a gruff voice, "What is your name, patron?"

Name? Ryo had not thought of a fake name yet. If he gave the soldier his real name, it was all over. But what name should he use? Then, a thought crossed his mind. His hand rested upon his sword thinking about the possibility of using it. Then his mind began to be filled with some of the stories

of old he had read. About the lost age of man and of kings and heroes and brave warriors and sword wielding… knights. Knight? *That's it!*

"The name's Knight," Ryo replied smoothly. "What's this commotion all about? I'm trying to rest here. I had a very troublesome night."

"I-I'm so sorry, sir. We are searching for a criminal who left town last night. His name is Ryo and there is bounty for his capture."

"I'm sorry but I don't know anyone by that name," Ryo replied trying to stay as calm as possible. *A criminal? What's going on?* He could feel beads of sweat form on his forehead when the soldier did not answer for a few seconds.

"My apologies," the man said with a bow. "I'll leave at once. I'm sorry for disturbing you. But if you know anything, contact us immediately. The description of Ryouto Yanjan is in the lobby of this inn as well as the details of the bounty."

"A bounty?" Ryo inquired.

"Yes! There is a substantial reward for the capture or any information leading to the capture of Ryouto Yanjan."

Ryo stood behind the door stunned. His own city had set out a bounty on his head? But why? He had done nothing wrong!

"If you have any information, please contact us immediately!" With that the soldier left and went to the next room as Ryo, or should it be Knight, shut the door quietly. Sweat dripped from his brow and he leaned up heavily against the door and slumped to the floor.

"That was close. Too close. I have to go now!" Ryo leaned against the door. "They put a bounty on my head?" Ryo shook his head in disbelief. Then his features changed and his fists clenched. "Whoever is setting me up will pay for this, I swear it. I'm going to seek out the real culprit and make him suffer. But first, I need an escape plan." He paused for a moment. "And I'd better come up with a good name and a cover story as well. But where should I go now? Hmmm… That merchant downstairs said that there was a ship nearby headed for Xian. I think that's a good place to hide and start searching for the real criminal." Ryo reached for the door handle but stopped to look back at the window. "And to find this fiend I'll need to learn to outsmart him, starting now."

The boat was a spectacular sight to behold and it was not too far from Kalay. Ryo (or Knight) crouched behind some bushes in order to scope the area out. Currently, the sailors were loading wooden crates onto the boat while other made sure that the ropes and sails were in perfect working order.

"Wow! What a magnificent ship! It must have cost a lot of money," Ryo said aloud to no one in particular. However, a voice from behind him proved that someone else was listening in.

"Yes, it was expensive, but it was worth it."

Ryo, with seemingly lightning fast reflexes, spun around and stood on his feet, his hand resting on the handle of his sword ready to draw and strike down his spy. But much to his surprise, Ryo was standing face to face with the merchant from the inn.

"Greetings, young one. May I ask why you are spying on my boat from here in the bushes?" Ryo was still wary of this

man, knowing not what he would do. The man continued to speak. "If you wanted to see my ship all you need to do is ask." He turned to Ryo and with a warm and inviting smile inquired, "Well, what's your name, young warrior?"

Young warrior? Did I hear him right? Ryo was fairly confused but he did not want to give out his real identity. "I am the one called Knight Yarvon. But please, call me Knight." Ryo was pleased that he had come up with a first and last name that would conceal his identity, at least for the moment.

"Very well, *Knight*. If you are interested, I could use some help on my vessel. You could earn a little bit of cash while you are at it. What do 'ya say? Would you like to help me? I just need a good warrior like yourself to protect my sailors and my cargo." Despite the emphasis on his fake name, Ryo got the impression that the man was a kind-hearted and gentle fellow. But for some reason, Ryo had a tingling feeling in the back of his mind that this could be somehow be some kind of trap, but he dismissed the feeling knowing that that surely would not be true.

"I accept your gracious invitation," Ryo declared with a bow. However, he did not take his eyes off of the merchant still unsure of his intentions. Suddenly, another man appeared seemingly from nowhere armed with a silvery-colored staff.

"Sir! Are you all right?" The man took one look at Ryo and then looked at the sword resting by his hip and stiffened. *He's still alive!* His eyes widened and he leveled his staff at the boy. "You will pay!" This burly man was about to attack if it was not for the merchant holding the man's clothes.

"That's enough, Gallahan! This boy has done nothing wrong. In fact, he is going to be joining us on our journey to Xian."

Gallahan stopped and turned to the merchant with a very confused look on his face.

"But, sir!" he protested. "I don't think that's a good…"

"That's final. He's going to help protect the shipments of spice that are on that vessel until we reach Xian." The merchant turned to Ryo and spoke as he did before, in a soothing and relaxed voice. "Son, if there is anything you need, do not hesitate to ask me."

"Um… Well, there is one thing I would like to know. That is, what is your name, sir?"

"Oh! I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce myself, haven't I? My name is Lord Joliet and this is my personal bodyguard Sir Gallahan. I came from across the seas but my trip was delayed by bad weather and monsters. Stopping here for supplies was in our best interest. But we must be going soon. I'll leave you two to mingle…" Lord Joliet was about to walk off to the boat when he heard screams coming from the dock.

Monsters? Ryo thought to himself and his suspicion were confirmed when he looked over at the dock. Girding his sword to his side, Ryo turned to the merchant and spoke deeply and confidently, "Looks like I'm needed already. Gallahan?" He cocked his head slightly at Gallahan and nodded. With that, both of the men took off as fast as they could towards the dock.

I can't believe that I'm actually rushing into battle. Ryo smiled and placed a hand on his longer blade. *I've been waiting to do this move for a long time now.*

Of the two of them, Ryo arrived first at the ship and the sight before him was surprising to say the least. The personnel

were fighting off what seemed to be jellyfish and sea urchins. Yet, these creatures were much larger than their usual size. They were at least three or four times bigger. But there was no time to stand and watch them when lives were at stake.

Using a technique called battoujutsu, Ryo unsheathed his katana and hacked through the first jellyfish creature with incredible ease. He then swung his sword down on a few of the other monsters. Each jellyfish that he killed disappeared in a splash of water. Ryo looked up to see three jellyfish ganging up on one of the sailors who was desperately trying to fight them off. Using his speed to his advantage, Ryo slashed through the two of the creatures before they even knew what had happened while the sailor took down the third creature.

"Thank you, sir," the sailor said as he ran off to help his friends beat up on another one of these sea monsters.

Meanwhile, Gallahan swung his staff down and brought it down upon a few unlucky jellyfish and urchins. He then began to beat off some other creatures that were attacking his men. Using his brute strength, Gallahan sent monster after monster flying through the air back into the ocean. He then turned to Ryo and his eyes widened considerably. "Knight! Watch out behind you!"

Ryo, who stood a few yards from the water's edge, had already sensed an entity emerging from the water and when he turned around, he was greeted by a blast of chilling, cold water. The beam of water sent him flying back at least ten feet into the air and he landed hard on his back. He continued to skid on the ground but by impaling his sword into the ground his backward motion was stopped. It did, however, leave a narrow furrow in the earth. Ryo reoriented

himself with his surrounding as he knelt on one knee propping himself up with his sword.

Gallahan rushed to the kid's side to make sure that he was all right. "Knight! Are you okay?"

Wiping the water from his face, Ryo looked up at the man and replied, "Yeah, I'm fine."

With a little help, Ryo stood to his feet and gazed at his attackers. There were three in all and they seemed to be human in appearance, but the green scales all over their bodies and the fins on their head, arms, and legs proved otherwise. Webbing was stretched between their fingers and toes for swimming. These formidable creatures scowled at Ryo and Gallahan with their sinister fang-filled grin and razor sharp claws in attack position.

"Mermen…" Gallahan huffed.

"Mermen?" Ryo asked.

"Yeah. They're very dangerous. I myself had a few run-ins with them before and, let me tell you, it was not fun. They can somehow shoot water from their hands and mouth. Not to mention that they can breathe underwater like a fish. And see those scales all over their body? It acts like armor plating." Gallahan spit in the dirt and swore at them. "Cursed fiends! If you're looking for a fight, then you've got one! Let's take 'em down!"

"Wait!" Ryo stepped forward. "Gallahan…!" he began in a tone that showed his seriousness, "I want you to help the other sailors and men. I shall take care of these monsters here myself."

"What?" Gallahan blurted out in shock. "You're not serious are you? You're only a kid! I myself have had trouble… I mean… You can't possibly take on three…"

"Gallahan! Do it! We need the sailors in order to get the ship going. Go and protect them. I'll be fine. If I need your help then I'll call for you. Go!"

Gallahan hesitated for a moment but soon turned around and faced the other sailors who were still under attack. "All right. I hope you know what you're doing."

"Yeah. Me too." With that, Gallahan took off towards the other sailors giving Ryo the chance to concentrate on the task at hand. *That power they used seemed so familiar in some way.* Ryo sheathed his sword and prepared himself in the stance for a quick draw of his sword, the battoujutsu. He used it when he first arrived on the scene, but this would be the first time that his opponents would see him coming. *They are a lot bigger and tougher and more dangerous than wolves so I had better be careful. And they don't seem to be the type to run away either. If I do this right, I should be able to take out at least one of them.*

The lead merman raised his arms into the air and they began to glow a soft blue color. Ryo cocked his head to one side and raised an eyebrow. *What the…?* Then, just as before, a blast of water came shooting out towards the blond warrior. Ryo was surprised but was able to roll out of the way avoiding the terrible aqua blow. *How are these simple-minded creatures able to summon such power? I don't understand…*

Ryo, who was still kneeling and still distracted with his thoughts, looked up just in time to see another surge of water come his direction. Ryo leapt off to the side and was

almost out of range when another merman appeared and shot a blast off water at him. This time, the merman finally hit the blond warrior and Ryo went flying backwards in a suffocating discharge of water.

The assault stopped and Ryo was left in a heaping mess of soaked and dripping wet clothing and assorted articles. *How can I beat them if they wield this level of power? I can't even get close enough to use my sword. But, I have to beat them. It's either them or me. Not a whole lot of choices.* Ryo chuckled as he stood to his feet. His legs seemed to wobble back and forth as though he had literally been swimming for hours. Regardless of his weary legs, Ryo drew his sword in front of him, pointed the tip of the blade at the lead merman. *It ends now!*

Gallahan was finishing mopping up a few creatures around him with his staff when he decided to check on his young partner. When he looked over, he saw a drenched Knight wearily standing and holding his sword in a weak position. Apparently, his battle was taking a toll on his young body. Gallahan was about to run over and help when he felt tentacles wrap around his feet. Gallahan growled and swore at it as he smashed it over the head with his weapon. He looked back at Knight to see that he was now charging the mermen.

"Foolish boy." He could not help but chuckle to himself. "You'd better beat 'em. I ain't done with you yet."

Ryo charged at the merman hoping that he could get in close enough to land an attack. He yelled out and tensed his grip on the sword. *I can do this! I won't lose!* The distance between them became closer and closer. The thrill of battle and the thought of victory made Ryo's heart beat even faster as adrenaline rushed throughout his body.

The mermen simply smiled (if that were possible) and spread out in a triangle-like formation. The action seemed strange to Ryo, but he did not let them distract his focus. He continued his charge on the one merman that had not moved.

"I'll take you out first!" Ryo yelled at the creature as he raised his sword.

Suddenly, Ryo saw something coming at his from the corner of his eye. *A column of water! No!* He took his focus off of the merman in front of him to shield himself from the side attack only to realize that he had fallen into their trap. In fact, all three mermen shot columns of water at him but at different times. Ryo lifted his arms up to block the first attack only to be pushed back enough into a second water attack only to be attacked in a third direction from the other merman. He was trapped right in the middle of a triangle water attack.

Ryo had no where to go. He could not even move due to the pressure of the three attacks at precisely 120° degrees apart. It felt as though a hole was being bore into his skin due to the concentrated water pressure. The force and pressure of the water was so great that he was lifted off the ground as the mermen simultaneously raised their arms. Ryo held fast onto his katana blade, but it was useless against water. Breathing was impossible from the sphere of water that now enclosed his body. *Is this the end?* Ryo thought woefully as he felt the air in his body being replaced by water and the entire world slow down.

"…ryo…"

It started just as a tingle in the back of his mind.

"…Ryo…"

The tingle became more and more clear. It was saying his name. Ryo could not really figure out if he had passed on into the next life or if he was still alive. But the voice, it sounded somewhat familiar.

"…Ryo… you promised… that you'd come back for me…"

It suddenly clicked in Ryo's mind. *Tinaro!* Ryo's eyes flashed open and he felt a new sensation flood his senses. He felt different. He could *sense* the water around him not with his body but with his mind. It seemed to call out to him. *I can't die! Not yet! I made a promise to a friend. A promise that I won't break!*

Ryo began to focus his mind on the water around him. A soft blue glow encompassed his body. Ryo's body crumpled under the pressure, but with relentless force and determination, Ryo thrust his body out. With a mighty crash and a thunderous roar the water was dispelled, most of which was sent upwards.

Ryo dropped to the ground and landed on both feet as nimble as any cat. He plunged his blade into the ground in front of him and hunched over on it for balance letting the water drip off his body. His breathing was labored and his body quivered from the water's chill. He was wearied from the exertion of not only the battle but also from the dispersion of the water sphere. But, one part of him did not look tired or distressed or expended. Ryo stood on wobbly legs staring at his enemies with eyes colored a rich aqua color.

The water that was still in the air began to fall as tiny rain droplets. Ryo faced the lead merman and lifted his head and hands to the heavens. With eyes closed, Ryo began to glow a soft blue color; however, no one on that battlefield was

able to see his body glow. Ryo's breathing soon became a visible white puff of air. The temperature in the area seemed to drop dramatically. The water that was going to rain down on them instead turned to a color of pure white and fluttered gracefully to the ground.

The mermen, as well as everyone else, were looking up at the sky with looks of confusion. Snow? In the middle of summer? It was unthinkable! Unless they had seen it with their own eyes, none of the sailors would have believed it. The remaining monsters shook off the distraction and attacked the sailors once again, some of which were still distracted from the snow. The mermen too shook off the distraction and went to step towards Ryo but found that they couldn't step. They felt something cold tingling at their feet. When all three mermen looked at their feet they were surprised to see that ice had formed around their feet and had traveled up their legs. The creatures struggled to pull their legs free, but it was to no avail. They couldn't walk let alone move their feet.

"Don't… move…" Ryo said coldly. He pulled his hands back and two spikes of ice formed in his hand. Ryo crossed his arms in front of him and took once last glance at the two mermen behind him as if zeroing in on their locations. With a quick flick of the wrist, Ryo let the two ice spikes go. Immediately, Ryo leaned forward and brought his right hand down on his sword's handle and charged for the merman in front of him. He raised his sword up and sliced diagonally upward. Ryo spun around with his back to the merman that he had cut down and sheathed his sword. The merman slid apart at the diagonal cut and landed on the ground with a thud. The death cries of the other two mermen sounded out as the ice impaled directly into their skulls. Their bodies slumped as their life-force was now gone from them.

The battle had been won and the cheering from the other sailors confirmed the fact that they had won their battle also. A few sailors and Gallahan approached Ryo. Gallahan was the first to speak. "Well done! I'm kind of surprised that you were able to beat those three monsters!" he said in disbelief as he placed on of his strong hands on Ryo's shoulders. "Though, you did make a bloody mess of this one behind you!"

Ryo huffed and faintly laughed. "He deserved it."

"We're just glad that you're on our side!" a sailor said excitedly.

Before he knew it, Ryo was surrounded by cheering sailors who were praising him on his exploit of killing three mermen. The cheering died down a bit when a man dressed in expensive robes walked towards them clapping his hands. "Very good! That was most impressive! I think we'll keep you!" The sailors laughed at the comment.

"Joliet…" Gallahan respectfully bowed.

Joliet turned to Ryo and once again expressed his thanks for the boy's efforts. "Thank you, son, for all of your work. You are indeed a welcome addition to the crew. And a fine addition you'll make." Joliet turned to the other sailors and crew members and gained their attention. "Sailors! Crew members! We have witnessed the heroic efforts of our newest member for this trip! I present to you…" he began as he held up his hands towards Ryo.

"Knight! You may call me, Knight!"

Chapter 6: Ch 4: Fury of the Knight

Chapter 4: Fury of the Knight

The ship was on the seas in no time and by the evening everyone was worn out and in their respective bunks. All were asleep except for one young man who sat facing the front of the boat with his back against the mast. The larger katana he had brought with him rested comfortably on his left shoulder while his shorter blade laid hidden back in his room. His blond hair waved with the gentle cool ocean breeze that blew across the surface of the deck. The peaceful splashing of the ocean waves against the boat would bring peace to most. However, Ryo's thoughts were anything but peaceful ones.

So much had happened in such a short period of time. This was actually the first chance that he had to himself to just sit, relax, and think. His thoughts drifted back to the people and the city that he had left behind. He wondered just what everyone was doing and if they even knew he was gone. Well, some of them must have known. After all, there was a bounty on his head for his capture, for Weyard's sake! Not only did he have to run from a city who sought his life in the name of justice but also he had to run from a group of unknown killers who knew who he was! They had even done away with his parents apparently! Tinaro had done her best to comfort him. It would be expected for tears to come with such morbid news, but Ryo didn't cry. He couldn't cry. He couldn't show weakness. He had to find out who had done this and make them pay.

As his thoughts churned over his parents, Ryo tried to pick out memories of them that were positive. But it seemed like all the things he thought about were the times when he was

cut down and blamed for the mistakes or carelessness of his brothers. He was constantly bombarded with negative comments. Just to hear the words "I'm proud of you" would have been encouragement enough. But still, Ryo thought that he was not that bad off. At least for that, he was thankful.

His thoughts then shifted from his parents to his friends. The few people he considered his friends were now miles and miles away. And the distance would only grow. Ryo began to recall individual people and certain situations that he found himself in.

Daishi, his best friend, had not always been helpful. In fact, on occasions, Daishi would be hurtful not only with his words but also with his actions. He would say things that cut down other people, Ryo in particular, in order to build himself up to look better than what he really was and he usually did it around girls. And talking to him about anything sensible was completely out of the question. There were many days where Daishi would have a tendency to be abusive. The bruises on Ryo's arms were proof of that. Even though Daishi was his good friend, Ryo was relieved when he left for he no longer had to hear or feel Daishi's abuses. But despite the bruises, Daishi was still his best friend and it pained Ryo to have to part with such a friend.

Other people his age were not all that friendly towards him. Ryo had tried to be kind and considerate to other people in his life, but that never seemed to matter. They didn't care about anything else but themselves. And even when they did show a little attention, it's only 'cause they wanted something. And that was something that Ryo could stand no longer. He refused to be a stepping stone for other people to walk all over him.

Then, his thoughts fell upon the only person who had seemed to be generally interested in what he had to say. Tinaro seemed to be the only person whom Ryo could talk to and have a good, *intelligible* conversation with. She was the sole purpose that Ryo was reluctant to leave town.

Footsteps from behind him alerted Ryo to possible danger and he steadied his sword for combat. The closer the steps came to him the closer Ryo was to drawing his weapon and attacking. The boards of the deck creaked as the person drew closer and closer and… then stopped.

"It's a beautiful night tonight." The person knelt down next to Ryo and extended his hand. "My name is Raine. I'm a friend of the captain. I saw what you did today and I must admit that I'm rather impressed."

Ryo gave a small smile but did not shake this kid's hand. His whitish-blue-colored hair hung over his face somewhat overshadowed his aqua-pacific eyes. The smooth complexion of his face shone from the light of Luna above. He had a medium to muscular build but he was in no way overweight. His light bluish short-sleeved shirt and long, loose-fitting brown shorts were perfect for working on a ship like this one.

Raine hesitantly retracted his hand and glanced at the sword Ryo had with him and spoke, breaking the awkward silence. "Your techniques and your swordsmanship are truly unusual here in these parts… um…"

"Knight. And thank you. This sword has protected me many times," Ryo remarked in his deep tone trying to make himself sound like he'd done this a thousand times before. As he stroked the handle lightly he remembered the few instances when he had used his sword. First with assassins,

then ravenous wolves, and killer jellyfish and sea urchins, and then weird-looking scaly human sea creatures. What was next? In the mean time Ryo was getting more and more familiar with the art of swordsmanship, firsthand. Soon, he wouldn't have to pretend the part of a warrior, he'd be one.

"Have you ever…" Raine leaned down and sat uncomfortably close and whispered, "Have you ever killed a man?"

"Only when they get this close to me."

"Oh, sorry," the boy apologized chuckling to himself nervously. "But seriously… have you?"

Ryo shook his head. Killing monsters was one thing. But humans… that was something else entirely. Ryo hadn't actually used his sword to kill any human. When the assassins had attacked his city, Ryo hadn't seen their faces. He imagined that they were just creatures who merely acted like humans. He was glad that he couldn't see their faces. The thought of taking someone else's life somewhat scared him, especially if he saw their face. He wasn't a killer. He merely had to protect the one he loved.

"Not even once?"

Again Ryo shook his head. *Those ninja's weren't human, after all. They deserved to die for threatening me. For threatening Tinaro.*

"Wow! I just… I just find it hard to believe after watching you take down so many creatures so effortlessly. And to take down not one but three mermen! Shoot! Gallahan struggles with just one of them!"

"So I've heard," Ryo chuckled. He wasn't much for small talk especially when he was interrupted with his thoughts. But

there was something different about this kid that Ryo couldn't quite figure out. It was as if there was a cool refreshing aura surrounding him like the refreshing chill after a heavy downpour.

"To think that there are other people like me in this world." Raine leaned back against the mast and faced the starboard side.

Things suddenly came to a screeching halt in Ryo's mind. Ryo looked over at the boy in alarm. "What do you mean 'people like you'?"

A smile crept onto Raine's face and he turned to look at Ryo. "Let me show you what I mean." He looked around to make sure that no one was watching and then he closed his eyes. A familiar blue aura began to form around his body and he held out his hand. Ryo's eyes widened as he saw the boy glow a soft blue color. However, Ryo's eyes widened even more when he saw water droplets forming in Raine's hand to make a small pool of water. Then from the water two small streams spiraled around his hand and up his forearm a little. After a few moments spinning the water, Raine lowered the temperature of the water quickly and the small streams froze; and, with one more command from the boy, the water dropped to the deck and shattered.

Ryo's eyes were wide open as he watched the display of water manipulation. He reached out his hand and tentatively touched the shattered ice and felt that the water was indeed frozen. "That was… impressive!"

"I can only do a little bit. I haven't been trained like you have."

"Well…" Ryo began. "I myself can only do a little bit." *What he doesn't realize is that I haven't been trained. I don't even*

know how I did all that in the first place!

"What? Yeah, right!" Raine exclaimed. "You turned the water from those mermen into snow before it even reached the ground! Then you killed two of them with spikes of ice! I'd say that you can do a lot! At least more than what I can do."

Ryo felt himself getting a little warm despite the chill of the night air. He shifted uncomfortably against the mast and slyly tried to scoot away from the inquisitive boy.

"Tell me. Where did you learn to do that?" Raine asked eagerly.

"I… uh… didn't learn it from any one…"

"Really! That's amazing!"

"Shhhh…" Ryo looked around the deck. *If this kid gets any louder, the whole ship will wake up. And he's asking way too many questions.*

"Listen," Ryo began as he stood to his feet and wiped himself down. "I'd rather not talk about this. And I'd rather that you not mention this to any one else either."

"Ohh… Gotcha. I can keep a secret."

Ryo started to walk to the front of the ship but quickly spun around. "No! It's… not about keeping a secret. It's more than that. It's about you forgetting everything that you saw or thought you saw."

"Why? Are you afraid of what other people might think?"

"No." Ryo paused for a moment. "I'm afraid of what other people might… do." Ryo's eyes dropped and he turned to

walk to the railing. He leaned down on it with his elbows as he gazed into the vast blackness of the ocean.

"You too, huh?" Raine took up a similar position next to Ryo on the port side railing. "I may only be seventeen but I know what other people would do."

Ryo glanced at the boy confused. "Care to explain?"

"I was exiled a long time ago from my village. The people thought that I was using witchcraft or some kind of black magic. They became afraid of me. Word got around town and it went from bad to worse. The other kids mistreated me and some even went as far as to throw rocks at me. They even began to go as far as refusing service for my family. The only way that people would service my family was if I left. It was the only option I had. So, when I was fifteen, I left town. Luckily, a ship was docked in the harbor so I snuck aboard. That's when I met Captain Hanruh. He kindly accepted me as part of his crew and I've been with him now ever since. It's been about 2½ years now. I've kept my secret hidden away from even him this whole time for fear of being exiled once again."

Ryo could not believe what he had heard. Raine had been exiled from his hometown simply because people were afraid of his powers! That made Ryo angry. The fact that other people made fun of Raine simply because he was different ignited a fire in Ryo's soul.

"That's terrible." Ryo empathized. "I know how you feel."

"Really? You're an exile too?"

"Uhmm…" Ryo stammered. *Great! What do I say?* Ryo thought for a quick moment and replied, "Not exactly. I'm

more like a…" *More like a what? This is a great fix you got yourself into now, Ryo. Think!*

"Like a wanderer?" Raine asked.

"Uhh… Yeah… I'm just, a wanderer." Ryo sighed mentally. *That was a close call.*

"That's pretty impressive! I'm sure you've been all over and seen many different sites!" Raine said excitedly.

"Hmph. Yeah… Anyways, where *was* your hometown?"

"Actually, it's an island. I lived near a group of islands called the Apojii Islands. I mean, I *used* to live there. But now, I'm just a sailor. I'm kind of like a wanderer like you, except on the ocean. I've had the opportunity to go places that I would never have gone before."

"And one such place was the oriental town of Xian, remember?" A voice from behind them alerted the pair to a new stranger in the conversation. But this stranger was someone that Raine knew very well.

Raine stood to his feet and acknowledged this person with respect. "Captain. I came up here for some fresh air and to talk to our new recruit here." Raine motioned for Ryo to come closer. "Captain Hanruh, this is Knight. And Knight, this is Captain Hanruh."

Ryo shook the man's hand and noticed the roughness of the man's hand. His rough skin contrasted with Ryo's much smoother hand. *That must come from years of experience on the seas.* Ryo observed. The captain had many different scars on his hand, each one of which probably had a different story to tell. The captain was a stocky fellow with dark sandy blond hair and a light patch of facial hair on his

chin extending up his jawbone. The brown eyes of this individual revealed to Ryo the look of a toughened and experienced sailor.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir," Ryo bowed with respect.

"As it is with me. I am glad to have you here on my vessel to protect my sailors. I can always use the help," he replied with a grin.

"Well, I'll do whatever I can to help," Ryo said with mild enthusiasm. *Did he say that this was **his** vessel? But what Joliet told me...* Ryo shook his thought to the back of his mind for later contemplation. "This is actually the first time that I've been on a large ship. Heck, it's the first time I've ever been out on the ocean."

"Yeah? You don't say? Well, the waves can be a bit rough at times and some people just can't handle it; but I love every moment about being on the ocean. This ship and I have had some good times together." The captain sighed as he looked out over the ocean. "You said that this was your first time on a ship this size?"

"Well, yeah. Effectively."

"Well then, I think that I should have Raine here show you around. It will help familiarize you with the ins and outs of the ship. Raine?" Captain Hanruh turned to the young lad to see his reaction.

"Sure. That sounds like a good idea. But for now, I think that we should all get some rest. I have a feeling that tomorrow will be a busy day for all of us."

"Great idea. Well, Knight, it was good to meet you. And, no offense, but I hope that we will not need your services."

"Yes, I understand. Raine, Captain, until tomorrow then. But I'm going to stay and keep watch for a little while longer if you don't mind," Ryo replied as he half shrugged his shoulders.

"Hard at work all ready, I see! I like that! Well, have a good night," Hanruh responded as he and Raine walked off to the lower decks to get some rest.

Ryo was then left to his thoughts once more. A troubling feeling settled into his soul as he began to think over these new acquaintances. *I'll do my part. Then once I'm done here, I have to move on. If I stay in any place for too long then I risk being caught.* Suddenly, Joliet's image popped into Ryo's mind making the blond shiver. *Where is that guy? And why does he make me so uncomfortable?*

The morning came quickly and as light from Sol began to filter over the horizon, with the sailors were already hard at work. Ryo watched on from the very front of the boat seeing the hard work that was involved with a ship. While watching the sailors work, Ryo was also keeping a close eye out for any potential trouble, not that he would find anything during the day but still. It was a diverse crew indeed with people ranging in size, height, and color. As Ryo continued to scan the deck, he caught a glimpse of a familiar face from across the ship. Raine glanced over to where Ryo was and waved him over. Ryo returned the wave and realized that Raine was directing him over. He watched as Raine headed toward the helm and began to converse with the one steering the ship.

I wonder what that was about. Maybe they'll let me steer the ship. Ryo jumped down from his post and began to slowly make his way to the helm. However, passage to the

wheel was difficult with all of the sailors moving around and with various boxes of equipment lying around.

As Ryo passed one of the sailors, a gruff male voice sounded in his head. *I hate this work the captain makes me do! He just gets to sit back and do whatever he wants.* Ryo shook his head as he passed the man, his voice fading from his mind. *That was weird.* Ryo thought to himself. *I could have sworn…* Ryo was still trying to figure out what that was all about when he bumped into another sailor.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!" the sailor said in a grumpy voice.

"Sorry, yeesh." Then, as the man carried a bundle of ropes away, Ryo could hear that same man's voice reverberate in his head. *Little brat! How's someone so small gonna protect us all? We should throw him overboard with the captain and…* Again, like the last time, the voice faded from Ryo's mind the farther the man walked away.

By now, Ryo was thoroughly confused and slightly angry. *What in the heck was all that about? Did I just hear his thoughts?* His confusion was clearly evident on his face by the furrowed brow and the look of bewilderment in his pacific-blue eyes. Right before he headed up the stairs to the wheel, another sailor was going down them with a more unnerving look toward him.

Wait a minute! Could this kid be the one they are looking for? The one with the bounty?

Ryo's eyes widened and he kept his gazed fixed on the sailor as he passed him. *Did he just say…?*

"Is everything all right?" a familiar voice asked.

"Oh… uh, Raine," Ryo fumbled as he was suddenly broken from his thoughts. "I… er, um… it's nothing. I'm fine. It's probably just the ocean waves. I'm not used to so much shifting and movement back and forth."

Raine laughed. "Yeah! That's how everyone feels at first. You get used to it though."

"Well, I hope so. I kind of feel like I'm gonna be sick. Anyways, how's everything look?"

"Good. We're about a seven days journey away from Xian. That is, if we catch a good wind."

"Well, that's good to hear. And hopefully we won't have any monster attacks," Ryo commented.

"Out in these waters, it's not the monsters that we need to worry about," the man at the wheel said, "It's the pirates."

"Pirates?" Ryo repeated questioningly.

"Yeah," Raine began, "It's one of the reasons I called you over here. The pirates in these waters are led by a man named Briggs. He and his pirates will stop at nothing to raid ships to obtain our wares in order to sell else where. But he's not the only pirate that roams these waters. There are reports of another group of pirates with a ship that has tattered sails that can go faster than a ship with sails."

"What? How's that possible?" Ryo questioned. "I thought that the sails on a boat made use of wind speed and direction to carry them across the waters."

Raine nodded. "Yeah, you're right. But somehow, this ship… I don't know. It goes faster. The pirates on this ship are much worse than Briggs and his crew. These pirates have gone so

far as to kill a whole crew just for the fun of it! They are ruthless bandits with remorse."

"Wow!" The realization in Ryo's voice showed that he understood the seriousness of these pirates. "I had no idea."

"Now, now. There's no need to scare everyone with these stories, Raine." A new voice spoke up as he walked up the steps opposite where Ryo had come up.

"Captain…" Raine and the sailor saluted the man and showed him the respect of his position.

"At ease you two," Hanruh said as he walked to the railing by the wheel and glanced past Ryo's shoulder and into the water beyond as if seeing something the others could not. "I don't deserve to be saluted." His gaze fell and he made brief eye contact with Ryo.

"Can I ask why not?" Ryo said with curiosity.

"It's… a long story… you see… This vessel once belonged to my father until…"

"Until those bloody pirates attacked…!" the man at the wheel spat out with indignation.

The captain cleared his throat and the sailor quieted down. "We try to avoid any known location where they've been spotted. But still, sometimes they manage to find us."

"You've been attacked before?" All the talking around them ceased once the words left Ryo's mouth. The young adult looked around to see the looks that the nearby sailors gave. *What'd I do?* He wondered. After an awkward moment of silence, Captain Hanruh turned to Ryo and spoke quietly.

"Yeah… About seven years ago, my father was sailing these waters with cargo bound for Alhafra when they attacked during the night. Unfortunately, it wasn't Briggs."

"What? What do 'ya mean 'unfortunately'?" Ryo asked confused.

"Briggs is a man who will only steal what he needs," explained the sailor at the wheel. "He doesn't kill anyone just for no reason."

"Really? That's unusual."

"Yeah. He's I guess what you'd call an honest pirate. But a pirate's still a pirate," the sailor said.

"I'll never forget that day. We ran into the other group of pirates. They were ruthless. Bodies were strewn everywhere. They fought dirty. It didn't matter. Women. Children. They cut them down all the same."

Ryo listened on but realized that his hand was shaking. *That's awful. How could anyone do such a thing?*

"My father had hired some extra help for that journey. Warriors from Tolbi. They fought bravely against them. My father was helping to get me to safety when he was stabbed from behind." The captain lowered his head and wiped what Ryo guesses were probably tears. "Though the bandits were repelled, my father never got to share in the victory. He… actually… died… in my arms."

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea," Ryo said with sympathy as he put a hand on the captain's shoulder. Ryo looked at Raine and saw the obvious look of remorse for the captain's loss.

"This was his ship. But now it belongs to me. I took over command of this ship determined to get revenge for my father's death. I searched for those pirates endlessly, running his crew and his inheritance for me down into the ground. But after months and months of searching, I never found them. It was like they had disappeared. When I learned that everyone on the ship was on the verge of mutiny, I finally decided to give up. What could I do?" The captain looked down at the sailors who were busy with their chores and smiled for the first time since he had arrived on the scene. "I realize now how foolish I was. And I should have taken better care of the legacy that my father left behind. Using them for my own personal use was wrong and now I'm out here trying everything to repent for what I've done." Captain Hanruh walked over to the railing next to the stairs and gazed out at the many men working on deck. "Many of these men worked under my father and some are even the sons of my father's crew. I just hope that someday I'm able to make it up to them somehow."

Ryo looked at the many men who were working tirelessly on deck. He then turned to the sailor steering the ship whose gaze was fixed on the captain. Suddenly, that particular sailor's voice sounded in his mind. *You took the lives of so many good people, including my father; and for that, I will never forgive you.* The sailor then noticed Ryo watching him and he gave a small smile and then focused his attention forward.

What was that just now? Was that the sailor's thoughts I heard? Ryo wondered silently. *I've got to get a hold of myself. I can't read minds, can I? But still... I can't help but feel like some of these men seem to be displeased with the captain. And I can kinda see why.*

Ryo, Raine, and the captain all sat in the lounge and talked for the longest time about a whole variety of issues, from the surrounding landscapes to the stories that accompanied sea travel. They talked long into the afternoon until the light of day began to fade. The conversation turned to more personal subjects like where they were from and different likes and dislikes. Throughout the entire conversation, Ryo said very little except for the occasional comment now and then. But his silence was his way of keeping his identity a secret. But his silence didn't last long.

"What about you? You've pretty much heard all about us," Raine said as he finished listening to the captain's finishing comments about his latest remark. "Where are you from?"

"Me?" Ryo said as he reached for his cup trying to stall. *I'm just from a town of crazy wack-jobs who are trying to kill an innocent person. That's all. Yeah, like that'd go over well.*

"I mean. I was told that you were probably from Kalay or someplace," Raine said.

"I…" Ryo began then paused. "Who told you that?"

"It was the… uh… the-the merchant…"

"Joliet?" Ryo said with a degree of certainty. After all, it was the only merchant he could think of.

"Yeah, him."

Why would Joliet say that? Well, I guess he did see me in that inn. Instead of completely lying to them, he decided not to tell them the entire truth. He did like what Raine had called him earlier. "I'm not actually from Kalay. I'm… uhh… what you'd call a wanderer. I'm a traveling swordsman." Ryo

smiled and hoped that they would be satisfied with that answer.

"Really?" the captain said in seeming unbelief. "That's impressive. But still, to be traveling the country at such a young age. Surely you had a home somewhere, right?"

Maybe divulging into his past a little bit wouldn't hurt. It's not like he was going to be around long enough for them to realize who he really was. Besides, they were far enough away from town. "Actually, I was exiled from my hometown for a… uh… misunderstanding, just some things that I didn't do. So I became a wanderer to figure things out. But I'd rather not talk about it." Hoping that just that little bit of information would satisfy their curiosity for the moment, Ryo sat in quiet anticipation. Thankfully, it seemed to be enough.

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry about that," Hanruh said.

"It's all right."

"Well, you are welcome on my ship anytime. I welcome all kinds, right Raine?"

"Right!"

The captain stood to his feet and extended his hand towards Ryo and said, "If you'll excuse me, I must attend to…"

"Pirates!"

Everyone was alerted to the sudden cry of anguish coming from the deck. Ryo, who was closest to the door, was the first to move. When he opened the door and walked to the railing outside, he was greeted by the sight of sailors scrambling around getting anything they could to use as weapons. Of in

the distance in front of them and slightly to the starboard side, a ship shrouded in an unnatural mist was fast approaching. The evening light had been just enough to see into the fogy darkness the recognizable flag of a skull and crossed bones with what looked like flames in the background fluttering at the top of the mast. Indeed, this ship belonged to pirates. But, the ship's sails were torn and tattered. Coming off the front of the ship was what looked like a dragon's head. Then it suddenly hit Ryo like a brick wall. These weren't Briggs' pirates.

Ryo had his sword by his side; but despite that, he felt his hand shake and his body quiver. His entire body coursed with an unnatural chill as the stories from earlier came back to his mind. He could see it all in his mind as clearly as he saw the sailors right in front of him. People were getting slashed and were dropping like flies their blood flowing freely at the feet of merciless butchers. *I can't... This can not be happening!* Ryo's gaze was fixed on the pirate ship and his eyes widened with fear as his mind continued to race at one hundred miles per hour. *I can't do this!*

Raine, on the other hand, turned back into the room and headed for a dark locker located close by. Once he had it open, he pulled out two swords still in their sheaths. He secured one of them on his left hip and took the other to the captain. Captain Hanruh did the same and stepped outside past Ryo and started shouting orders to his crew. Raine followed but stopped when he saw that Ryo wasn't moving.

"Hey! Come on! They're coming! Don't just stand there!"

"No..."

"What?" Raine exclaimed.

"I can't..."

"What do you mean 'you can't'?"

Ryo shook his head. "I-I… can't do this… I can't kill…"

"But *they* can, and *they* will!" Raine put a firm hand on Ryo's shoulder. "Listen, you did fine against those monsters, right?"

"But that's different! They weren't human!" Ryo yelled.

"And neither are these people! Didn't you hear the captain's story? Didn't you hear how they mercilessly killed women and children? Well!"

"Yeah…"

"What the captain didn't tell you was that his father was protecting his wife and daughter too."

"What?" Ryo said surprised.

"That's right. Hanruh, his mother, and sister were all being led to safety by Hanruh's father. But he ran off and tried to be a hero and take on the pirates by himself. His father ran after him and caught him just as he heard the screams behind him. He turned around and watched helplessly as both his wife and daughter were cut to ribbons before his eyes. The father was paralyzed with shock. Hanruh himself had seen his mother and sister die at the hands of his own foolishness. In that moment, one of those pirates took advantage of the moment and stabbed the captain's father in the back."

Ryo was paralyzed and stunned. He opened his mouth to try to say something but words didn't come to him.

"Ever since then, Captain Hanruh has had to live with not only his father's blood on his hands but also the blood of his mother and sister. He's carried around his guilt all these years. But he has devoted his life to the well being of these sailors. He understands that sometimes in order to save a life you have to take a life."

"But..."

"Listen, you can stand here and say that you're a swordsman. But if you do nothing, then what good is it to be known as a swordsman? If we don't do anything now, then who will?"

Ryo didn't respond. The words Raine spoke cut deep into Ryo's heart. He was right. If he just stood by, what good was he? He called himself a swordsman? If he couldn't stand up against these guys then he may as well face whatever punishment the Cyril authorities had for him.

"Make the right choice. Either fight with us or run like a coward. But as for me, I'm gonna make the pirates bleed." Raine grinned and then sprinted off to the captain's side by the wheel.

The pirate ship was coming along the starboard side of the ship in the opposite direction of Hanruh's ship. The silhouettes of a few dozen men could be seen on the pirate ship, each holding ropes ready to swing over. As the two ships got closer, all aboard Hanruh's ship were ready to repel the boarders.

The ships neared each other. The faces of the people, if they could be called that, on the pirate ship soon became clearer. They scowled and shouted curses and promises of death. Just as it seemed that the battle would begin, Hanruh's ship suddenly changed course and turned portside. The pirate

ship also turned to port with hopes that the rear pirates could swing over. A few of the pirates decided to try to swing across, but they didn't even get close. The distance between the two ships was already too great and they fell into the ocean. One of them did get close, but he was too low. His body made an audible thud against the side of the boat followed by a cry and splash as he too fell into the ocean.

Ryo was still in a daze but when he walked farther out and looked back at the wheel he saw Raine holding the wheel hard to port. Keeping a keen eye on the pirate ship as they turned to their starboard side, Raine spun the wheel around to the other side. The ship shuddered as Raine held the wheel firmly, with a little help from the captain. As the ship began to turn, Ryo suddenly realized what the boy was trying to do. He was trying to get around the back of the pirate vessel. Raine then straightened out the wheel in hopes to gain some distance between them and the pirate ship.

Raine... He's doing all he can. Despite all that he knows about them. He still isn't afraid to make things difficult for them. He's not afraid fight against such odds. Ryo thought back to what Raine had said. *Sometimes, in order to save a life, you must take a life.*

The pirate ship continued its turn to the port side until they were turned all the way around and headed back in their direction. The distance between them was great, but despite the effort by Raine, the pirate ship was gaining on them.

"It was a good effort," the captain said to Raine. "But they're still gaining on us. We have no choice then." Hanruh unsheathed his sword and raised his voice to gather the attention of the sailors. "Men! Tonight, we fight for our honor, for our freedom, but most importantly, for our very

lives! Fight so that you have nothing to regret! Fight with all your heart! Fight to protect your right to live! But if they must take our life, then take as many down with you as possible! Tonight, the world will know that we gave these guys hell!"

A mighty cheer erupted from the sailors as they lifted their weapons into the air. The extra time that Raine had bought them allowed the sailors to grab their own swords for the coming battle. There was absolutely no doubt that the captain's little speech gave the crew motivation and increased their morale. Suddenly, the odds didn't matter anymore. All that matter was this: take down as many of them as you could before you died and make the pirates regret attacking.

The pirate's ship started to come along side Hanruh's vessel. The pirates were ready. The sailors were ready. The ships got closer and closer to being side by side. The tension in the air was thick. No one made a move. An eerie silence fell across both ships as both were poised to strike. Then, a single voice shouted from the pirate's ship followed by the other pirates. Captain Hanruh gave a shout followed by his crew. Then the pirates swung across yelling with their swords drawn. The sailors met them head on. A few pirate swords were flung through the air impaling a few sailors while other pirates slashed their way aboard.

All right! Ryo breathed confidently. His eyes narrowed and he girded his sword in his belt. *Let's do this!*

A pirate came swinging over in Ryo's direction. The scruffy, greasy looking pirate landed right in front of Ryo and growled. The pirate whipped his sword out and immediately swung at neck height. But Ryo unsheathed his sword, immediately placing his left hand on the dull edge, and

blocked the attack. However, his sword was not fully out of its sheath yet! The pirate saw this weakness and put more force into his blade by using a two-handed grip.

The blade inched closer and closer to Ryo's neck as he strained under the force the man was exerting. With his left hand by the sheath on the dull edge of the blade, Ryo steadied his blade against the pirate's blade. Ryo then pushed forward and up with his left hand to unsheathe the rest of his sword and also to lift the pirate's sword away from his neck. With his sword above his head and his left hand still guiding the blade, Ryo's was left without any defense.

The pirate was caught off guard but was already recovering with a diagonal slash to Ryo's right shoulder. But before he could bring his sword down, Ryo stepped forward slightly with his right foot, leaned down, and smashed his right elbow under and up into the man's unguarded jaw. The man staggered backwards in agony. Still in motion, Ryo rested his sword on his shoulders, took a step forward with his left foot, and brought his left hand smashing into the man's chest. A loud crunching sound was heard as the man's ribs cracked under the full impact of the attack. The man gasped and lost hold of his sword as he fell over the railing and into a watery grave.

"That makes one!"

Ryo looked up at the source of the voice and saw Raine giving him the thumbs up. Ryo gave a sly grin which quickly dissolved when Ryo saw a shadow land right next to Raine and lift up a metallic object.

"Raine! Watch out!" Ryo yelled out to the boy. Raine looked up just in time to roll backwards in order to avoid the incoming blade. He then stood to his feet and was attacked

by another pirate. But the boy had his weapon ready in a flash and was countering the pirate's attacks.

The sounds of clashing blades echoed in the night. Shouts and cries from both sides filled the air as both sides traded blows back and forth. No matter how many pirates Hanruh and his crew took down, more seemed to take their place. There were now a few dozen pirates threatening to overrun the ship. Despite the odds, each sailor fought bravely.

Ryo had run to the middle of the deck to help fight off a group of pirates who were all ganging up on one man. They never saw him coming. How could they with their backs turned to him? Ryo slashed twice, upwards then downwards, and two of the pirates dropped. The third swung around to attack Ryo, but he stopped when steel came shooting out from his chest. The sailor impaled the pirate with his sword. The pirate dropped to his knees with wide eyes keenly fixated on Ryo. Ryo looked at the man and swallowed hard. Ryo was still shaking from seeing the pirate, the human, dying before him. It was hard to watch so much carnage. So much death. But it was either kill or be killed. The pirate slowly smiled at Ryo as if to torment the boy. Ryo felt his face get hot and his face narrow in rage. He gripped his sword in his right hand backhanded and swung the handle across the man's face. Ryo spun around and found himself facing in the direction of the wheel where he saw the captain bleeding from a cut across his face and being surrounded by four or five men.

"Captain!" Ryo shouted. "I have to help him!" He had barely taken a step when someone from his left side attacked, swinging his blade down from above. Barely having time to react, Ryo had to block the attack with his blade still in its backhand grip. Ryo continued his blocking arc with his left hand on the very edge of the handle for added support and

brushed the attack off to the side. The man stumbled as Ryo directed his sword down. Then Ryo raised his right knee into the pirate's stomach sending the man skidding away on the deck for a few yards. Ryo heard a yell from behind him and turned his head to see another pirate charging at him with his sword raised. Spinning his sword around behind his back and turning around at the same time, Ryo re-gripped the sword the normal way and brought himself around to block the attack. He then thrust upwards and quickly brought the end of his handle down upon the man's forehead. The man went cross-eyed and staggered backwards with a pounding headache. Two more guys were coming up on either side of the pirate with the headache.

At this rate, I'll never reach the captain! I need to take these guys down in one strike! Ryo brought his sword back to his side for a lateral swing. He gripped the sword hard to put extra power into his attack. He focused his mind into his next attack pouring all his strength into the next blow. With a mighty yell, Ryo swung his blade outward and instead of hitting the incoming pirates with his blade, a violet arc leapt from his sword and slashed at the three men in front of him. In fact, the three men flew backwards knocking over three or four more guys. Ryo's eyes widened and he looked at his blade.

Did I just do that? Ryo examined his sword and could see a violet hue shimmering off of the blade. He then smiled. *I wonder if I can do that again.* Ryo felt a pulsing in his veins, but it wasn't his blood. No. It was different. It was hard to explain, but it was oddly familiar. Ryo closed his eyes briefly and thought back to when he had felt this way before. Then he remembered the time he was in Tinaro's house and he was able to listen in to the whispers of Tyson's conversation with Tinaro. *That's it!* Ryo embraced the feeling and he felt it get stronger and stronger. It felt like a cooling wind washing

over his body. When he opened his eyes, the color of them was no longer a pacific, ocean blue color but rather a deep, dark piercing shade of violet.

Ryo was just about to head over to the captain when he was forcibly thrown to the deck by something very heavy. He landed on his side and his sword was wrenched from his hands the moment he hit the deck. He looked slightly behind him to see a dead crew member on his back. Ryo struggled to remove the man from his person. Suddenly, the sharp edge of someone's blade appeared in his vision. He looked up the length of the blade to see a scruffy looking pirate grinning with blackened teeth.

"Say goodnight, chap," the man growled in a slight accent. The blade left Ryo's vision and it shimmered in the pale light granted by Luna as it was raised into the air for a final killing stroke.

A sudden surge of power began to flow into Ryo's body as he began to glow with an eerie dark violet light. The blond raised his hand up towards the pirate and gave a mighty battle cry as if trying to summon some great power. The violet aura from his body suddenly seemed to swirl and concentrate on his outstretched hand forming a slight arcing shape. From that hand exploded a violet crescent shaped blade of energy that hacked cleanly through the attacking pirate. The force of the attack was felt a second afterwards when a sudden wind gust blew in the same direction as the violet energy crescent.

The fighting on the boat stopped temporarily as both parties looked at the source of the disturbance. To everyone's surprise, the pirate that almost dealt the finishing blow to Ryo split in two pieces and fell to the deck in two separate thuds. The wind suddenly seemed to pick up again, but this

time it seemed to be swirling towards and around Ryo. The blond teen then slowly stood to his feet, the wind increasing as he stood up. What had once been a gently ocean breeze now turned into a fierce draft that seemed to spiral around Ryo. Pieces of debris flew around the boy in a spiral shape.

Then, all of the sudden, the draft subsided and unnatural hush filled the night air. Ryo's short blond hair ceased its ferocious movement and rested back on his head. His eyes were still shaded violet and his hands ready for any attempt at his life.

The pirates seemed to be frightened of this display of such power, or witchcraft, as some thought. None of them had seen anything like this. A few of them started to slowly back away.

Ryo reached down and grabbed his sword. The dark blade seemed to give off an afterglow effect as swung the blade around, above his head, and down to his right side. Ryo raised his left hand to his chest and curled his fingers slightly into a battle stance.

"Who's next?" Ryo's voice echoed deeply.

Everyone aboard the ship had parted from each other. On the one side stood the pirates and on the other side stood what was left of Hanruh's crew. Both crews were stunned by what had just happened. A man just got split in half! No one dared to attack! They couldn't really. They were frozen in place by fear. Ryo was left standing all by himself. The pirates certainly backed away from him. But, at the same time, Hanruh's sailors also backed away from him.

Ryo carefully looked at the pirates and watched their every move. They were tense and some were even shaking. Ryo

then glanced over to where Raine was and their eyes met. Some movement off to his side caught his attention.

"You… you think you can scare us off! No one has ever withstood our might! You, too, will fail!"

"Bring it on!" Ryo said darkly with his eyes narrowing on the lone pirate who addressed him.

"I'll kill you!" The pirate yelled out and charged straight for Ryo, aiming to kill with one blow. He leapt into the air for an aerial assault.

Ryo made his move in an instant. It happened so quickly that no one ever saw the blond kid move. Before anyone knew it, Ryo was in the air high above the pirate at an inhuman height to jump from just a stand still. His blade was outstretched in front of him, sharp end pointed upward, and stained with blood. The boy landed on the deck just after the bloody cleaved halves of a man passed on either side of him. The dual sounds of those pieces of flesh echoed in the evening air and struck fear into the hearts of all watching. Ryo turned to the remaining pirates and spoke in a voice that was much deeper and darker than his usual calm, soothing tone.

"You picked the wrong crew to mess with. This is your last chance. If you leave now, you might just live." A moment passed. A long, agonizing moment as everyone watched in horror. No body moved, not even the pirates. "You have no idea what I'm capable of. But I'd be more than happy to show you!" Ryo turned to face the bulk of the fiends, stuck his blade into the deck, and stretched out his hands.

The wind picked up again as it had done before. At first it was a gentle breeze, but that lasted only for a moment. Instantly, a hurricane force wind blew in from no where and

passed through the pirate's ranks, throwing them back in the general direction of their ship. The force of the unnatural wind was so fierce that a few of them went straight through the ship's wooden hull and into the cargo hold leaving large holes where they had gone through. The wind stopped, but there were still a few stragglers left on the ship. Ryo began to walk slowly towards the remaining pirates his hand reaching for his sword. The remaining pirates leapt off the boat not even bothering where they landed.

The last pirate had enough sense to grab one of the ropes that the pirates swung over on. But he didn't have enough sense to just keep his mouth shut. "Witch! He's a bloody wiiiiitch!" The man turned back to his ship and was about to jump over when he suddenly felt a warm sensation wash over his gut. He looked down to see the length of a dark blade protruding from his gut. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder and someone whisper in his ear.

"No… I'm your greatest nightmare!" Ryo grinned, his violet eyes darting back and forth across the pirate's ship. Ryo then leaned back down to the man's ear. "Tell your captain this: Your struggle was useless." Ryo spun around pulling his sword out of the man.

The man staggered and steadied himself on the railing to prevent from falling. He reached up and felt the wound in his gut. His breathing became more labored as his mind finally caught up with his situation.

"Go…" Ryo instructed. When the man didn't move, Ryo commanded more forcefully, "Go!" He lifted his hand with his palm outstretched and released a focused burst of energy out from his palm. The result was that the man was hit by a ghastly fist and thrown toward the ship.

The pirates clamored back aboard their vessel freeing themselves from Hanruh's ship and turning away from them. They soon were sailing away vanishing back into the night almost as quickly as they had arrived on scene. Silence filled the air as the witnesses took a moment to comprehend what had just occurred. Some of the crew members were frightened at what they had seen but most were excited that the pirates had been repelled.

A few moments passed. It soon began to dawn on the survivors that they were just that, survivors. A cheer erupted from the sailors as they rejoiced at being alive and that the pirates had been beaten. But not everyone rejoiced with them. Raine leapt over the side of the railing by the wheel and knelt by the captain's side. He was alive but his wounds needed to be tended to immediately.

Another figure appeared dressed in lavish clothing gawked in amazement. "This is the boy that he wants so badly. Hmm… I can see why. But I could put him to better use than he ever could." The man then disappeared back below deck to his quarters scheming.

Ryo stood on the deck alone and watched the men shout and rejoice for something they did not do. Well, not entirely. They had managed to hold their ground; however, they wouldn't have lasted much longer under the onslaught. Ryo closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief exhaling all of his emotions out with his breath. He then staggered as the battle finally caught up with him. He felt truly exhausted and his legs wobbled like he had been swimming all night. His entire body ached. He leaned up against the railing for stability. When he looked at his sword he saw that it was stained with blood. He was in the process of wiping it off when he heard someone call out his name.

"Knight," a familiar male voice called out.

The blond looked to see Raine waving his arms in the air. "Hey, Knight! Over here!"

Ryo, or should it be said Knight, sheathed his sword and walked over to the boy and looked around the deck. Bodies lay strewn every, pirate and sailor alike. There were discarded weapons everywhere as well as torn and bloodied clothing. The smell of blood lay heavy in the air. Ryo felt himself becoming more and more sick with each step that he took.

"That was… uhmmm… some battle, wasn't it?" Something in the tone of Raine's voice didn't sound quite right. It was as if the kid was scared of something.

"What? Did we win?" Ryo asked as if he had just woken from a dream.

"Well, yeah, but…" Raine nodded in the direction of the center of the deck.

Ryo followed Raine's nod and he gasped at the sight he saw. Two bodies were cleanly cut in half! Ryo had to look away because the sight was too grotesque.

"What happened to them?" Ryo asked.

Raine cocked his head to the side and scrunched his eyebrows. "You… did…"

"I-I did that? There's no way!"

"Yeah, it was… something…"

"I don't even remember doing that… And the pirates?"

"Gone. Scared off by that," he said nodding to the cleaved bodies, "…and you…" Raine said his voice and body shaking.

Why is he shaking? What did I do? I honestly don't remember... Ryo looked at the other sailors and they were all looking at him with incriminating eyes.

"But the important part is that we won and that we can now head off to our intended destination," Ryo replied loud enough for many of the sailors to hear as he tried to ease the tension he felt in the air. He looked at Raine and whispered, "It's okay now."

"O-okay…" Raine stammered as he looked down. *Who is this guy? Is he really who he says he is? Can he be trusted? Can… can I trust him?*

Ryo looked surprised when he suddenly heard the voice of Raine in his head. *Wait a minute!* Ryo thought. *I must have heard Raine's thoughts. I certainly didn't hear him say it with his mouth.* Ryo concentrated a bit more.

Raine looked up at Ryo once again. *His eyes… they're blue again. Does that mean that we're safe? Can we be safe with him?* The light bluish-white haired boy shook his thought away and smiled at Ryo. "Thanks. I'm fine. But I was curious, Knight…"

"Yeah… about what?" Ryo asked questioningly.

"Is that even your real name?"

"Wait, what? What do you mean? Of course it is," Ryo asked taken back by Raine's last statement.

"I'm just saying that… someone like you… with the abilities that you have… should be famous all over. But how come the captain who's been pretty much all over these waters and the merchant Joliet who's traveled over much of the land have never even heard of you."

"Let me ask you," came the raspy voice of the captain.

"Sir!" Raine said as he helped the captain to his feet.

The captain nodded to the boy and turned toward Ryo. "You claim that you were exiled from your hometown. And I bet that that happened quite recently, didn't it?"

Ryo froze. Did he know about what happened? Did he know who he really was?

"I heard that a wanted criminal escaped from a town called Cyril and fled during the night. I also heard about some kind of bounty for him. I did some investigating and found out that this criminal looks an awful lot like you, Knight. There's no way that you are this person, is there?"

Ryo tensed up. He felt his joints freeze up and his blood race faster in his veins than ever before. *What do I do? He knows! But how?* Ryo thought for a moment. *Wait! The bounty… Can I say that…* Ryo mentally sighed. *I guess there's only one way to find out…*

"Well, you caught me. I had just come down from the mountains after a successful hunt and stopped in Cyril to restock my supplies. That's when I heard of what had happened just days earlier. I figured if I tracked him down then I'd collect on that bounty and I could get better gear."

"Really? So you're claiming that you're some kind of bounty hunter?"

"Yeah, of sorts. That may be why you haven't heard of me. I mean, I spend most of my time in the mountains and in remote locations on different jobs and assignments." Ryo began to get a little nervous and worried. *I have to stay calm.* Any evidence that the captain's questioning affected Ryo was not visible on the boy's face. Instead, a small smile cropped up in the corner of the blond's mouth. His eyes narrowed as he spoke. "I **was** traveling, sir, when I heard of the bounty. I was hoping that I would be able to catch him so I could make some money off of him. But…"

"Enough!" the captain gruff voice boomed. He turned slightly behind him and motioned his men behind him to come close. "For some reason, I don't believe you. But it does make sense. Unfortunately, I'm gonna have to ask you to surrender your weapons to us."

"What? Why?" Ryo asked confused.

"Your story does make sense. But, I've been told differently. Do you have an alibi?"

"Well, no… I work alone…"

"Then I have no choice. Men, take this boy and lock him up immediately!"

Shocked could not possible describe what everyone was feeling at that point especially Ryo himself. He scanned the crowd to see his options. *What now? I could probably fight my way through them, but I'm outnumbered and exhausted. What did he mean when he said that he was told differently?* His eyes suddenly fell upon the merchant Joliet who had come out of his cabin to see what all the commotion was about. The merchant looked over and smiled. *Could it be…? He must have known! I bet that he*

knew from the moment he met me! He was probably planning this from the very beginning! That bastard!

The crew members stepped warily towards the blond with ropes in their hands ready to tie him up. The kid turned to Hanruh and tried to play off the accusation. "Hold on! First of all, did not the bounty say that the criminal's name was… uh… a Ryouto Yanjan?"

"Yes…" the captain replied hesitantly.

"My name is Knight *Yarvon*, not Ryouto *Yanjan*. And second of all, I told you my story already. I'm just a wanderer and a bounty hunter. I spend most of my time in the mountains. I haven't had a real home in quite a while."

"That may be true but you told me that you were exiled from your home, just like Ryouto. How do you explain that?" the captain countered confidently.

"Being *exiled* and *escaping* as a *fugitive* are two different things." Ryo took a few steps around to loosen himself up. "As far as I understand it, this… this Ryo character escaped from his city making him a fugitive whereas I… I was *exiled* from my hometown, never to return," Ryo said smoothly trying to swindle his way out of this situation. And it looked as if it was working too.

The captain's face showed the realization that he may be wrong. He paused for a moment. He did have a point. Knight did say that he was exiled, but this Ryo was a criminal who had fled his punishment. Being an exile and being a fugitive were two different things. Could he have been wrong? The captain thought over everything in his mind for a moment. Then, something came to mind that didn't quite make sense.

"Then tell me this: how come your description matches that of Ryouto that was placed up by the Cyril military?" the captain said.

With that one question, fear and distress began to seep back into Ryo's soul. *What now? I can't let myself be caught without a fight.* Ryo straightened the small hints of worry from his face and smiled at the crowd hoping to confuse them with it. "When I was still in my hometown, I was told by many of the townsfolk that I looked almost exactly like my brothers. I have reason to believe that this may be the same kind of case. Our descriptions might be similar but I assure you that I am not this Ryouto." The blond was satisfied with his answer and hoped that it would satisfy the sailors and the captain once and for all.

"What a mess," a new voice uttered. Everyone turned to see Joliet approach the scene. "I believe that until this matter be resolved that you should be kept under lock down until we can prove your true identity. I mean, if that's all right with you, Captain." Joliet implored the captain as he considered the request.

"I think that that is a wise choice. I'm sorry but this is for your own good." The captain motioned for the men holding the ropes to move in.

No! This can't be happening! Then I guess that I have no choice. Ryo reached for his sword but was stopped when a hand rested upon his shoulder. It was Raine and he seemed to say with his gaze: *Don't do it.* The voice of his friend then seemed to echo in his mind that phrase.

Don't do it. It'll only make things worse. Raine's voice echoed in Ryo's mind.

Without even thinking about it, Ryo mentally replied, *"But..."*

I'll help you. *But just this once.*

After a short moment, Ryo eased himself from his stance and retracted his hand from the handle of his blade. The sailors then approached him, took his sword away, and tied the ropes around his hands. Ryo then willingly let himself be led down into the prisoner hold as a captive.

I can always use my powers to break free. But if I can clear my name, then I'll be home free and don't have to worry about escaping. For now, I'll just wait and see what happens. A subtle smirk slowly made its way onto Ryo's face as he disappeared into the belly of the ship. *Some trip this turned out to be.*

Chapter 7: Ch 5: The Choice of Money and Revenge

Chapter 5: Money and Revenge

After days of searching, the Cyril military failed to turn up any evidence that Ryo had even left town. Even though his description had been sent out to the nearby towns, no one said that they had even seen the boy. With no outstanding features, like a scar on his face or a blade the size of a door, it seemed as though Ryouto Yanjan had disappeared from off the face of Weyard!

The search party sent to Vault and the surrounding area turned up to be a dead end. The search party sent to the Tolbi metropolitan area once again turned up nothing. And the search party led by Tyson to Kalay also turned up nothing. However, the inn keeper had given them the most evidence so far.

Tyson decided to head to the inn early in the morning to ask the inn keeper a few more questions before he headed out of town. When he arrived at the inn, he noticed a few people sitting at the tables in the lobby reading the local paper drinking something while others were eating their breakfast. After taking a quick glance around at the patrons, Tyson walked over to the reception desk where a young lady was busy with her work.

"Excuse me…" Tyson said clearing his throat.

"Yes," the girl replied. "How can I… Oh… It's you again. Shall I get the boss?"

"That would be appreciated."

"Is someone calling for me?" a voice said from around the corner behind the desk. A man of a muscular build walked out as he dried his hands from some work he must have been doing. "How can I help you?"

"Is there someplace we can talk?" Tyson asked.

"Yeah, sure," the man said. He turned to the girl and said, "Watch over the place til I get back, okay?"

"Okay," the girl replied.

The two men walked back behind the desk, through a corridor, and around the corner to a small office. It was no doubt the inn keep's office. The man offered Tyson a chair to sit in while he himself went around his desk and sat in his chair.

"So, what do 'ya need."

"A few days ago, you said that someone came into your inn really late?" Tyson asked.

"Oh, yeah! He was in real bad shape though. He told me that he had been attacked by wolves, but that he managed to scare them off with…"

"But did he look like the person described in this bounty?" Tyson asked more fervently.

"Yeah! I told you before he did! You can't forget a face like his!" the man said as he leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin. "Especially coming in as late as he did."

Tell that to everyone else. Tyson straightened himself and composed his thoughts. "And he came here to your inn? What did he say? Did he tell you where he was going?"

The man thought for a moment. "When he came in, he asked for new clothing and a room for the night. As for where he was going, I didn't ask."

"Why not?"

"Hey, as long as they pay their bill and don't make a mess of my rooms, I don't really care where they're going. I figured since he was armed that he was headed for Tolbi for that tournament that'll be held soon."

"He wasn't sighted in Tolbi. We've searched there already." Tyson sighed. Maybe he should approach this from another angle. "Tell me about the other people staying here at the time."

"Well, there were a few people passing through heading for Tolbi. Oh! There was a merchant that passed through here a few days ago!"

"Really?" Tyson's interest was piqued.

"Yeah, he comes through occasionally. I asked him how he was doing, 'cuz I see him so much and 'cuz he's such a, how shall I put it, a valued client." The inn keeper smiled widely. "Anyways, he told me that he was gonna head north to Cyril to do some business; however, he didn't when he heard bout the attack. Tragic."

"So where was he headed?" Tyson asked eagerly.

"I dunno. I did overhear that he was about to set sail soon."

"To go where?"

"Didn't you hear me before? I don't ask unless they tell me. But the only ships I could think of would be at the docks."

"Well, thanks for your time." Tyson got up and abruptly left the inn keeper and the inn entirely. *Ryo could have gotten on any ship that left within the past few days.* Tyson found a group of his men and took them down to the docks to question the locals.

It was early afternoon in the bustling city as sailors and merchants and travelers of all kinds flooded the streets. Tyson was surprised to see the docks also filled with people, all trying to board the next boat that would cross the Karagol Sea. Tyson saw that the vessel's boarding ramp was roped off and blocked by a stocky, rough looking man wearing a red bandana.

Perhaps he would know of any ships leaving town within the past few days. Tyson thought to himself as he motioned his company to follow. The noise from the crowd was clamorous but not ear deafening. The Cyril military pushed their way to the front of the crowd occasionally stating their occupation and intention. Finally, Tyson was at the front of the crowd and looking directly at the bouncer.

"Excuse me…" Tyson began to get the man's attention.

"Hmm? Yeah, whatch you want? We ain't boarding anyones yet. So yous can back off and waits like the rest of thems," the man said in a gruff voice that one would associate with the toughest of sailors. "And no amount of monies will convince us of sailing otherwise."

"Whoa, hold on. I'm not a passenger. I just came to ask you a few questions." Tyson cleared his throat and began with his interrogation. "My name is Tyson and I'm a part of the Cyril military. We are currently looking for a wanted criminal named Ryouto Yanjan. Have you heard of him?"

The sailor gave a questioning looked at Tyson trying to determine what new sort of trickery this was to get on the boat. But the sincere words that emitted from him convinced the sailor of Tyson's genuineness.

"Naw, I ain't heard of him. Whys?"

"There's a bounty for his capture."

"How much?" the man asked intrigued.

"Ten thousand coins for his capture or five thousand for information leading to his capture."

"Well, what'd he look like? Come on!" the man demanded eagerly.

Tyson reached in his satchel and pulled out a small rolled up piece of paper with the description and a rough sketch of Ryo in it and handed it towards the man. As the man read the description and studied the sketch, Tyson told the sailor what they knew so far.

"This young man is wanted by our city and we are offering a fair reward for his live capture. We have a strong reason to believe that he may have taken refuge in either the city of Kalay or may have gotten passage in the ships docked here."

Thinking deeply, the sailor concentrated on the description of the one they wanted; but his memory came up short. He had no recollection of any such person matching this description come across his path.

"Sorry, but I ain't seen the boy. Wish I did. Could use the monies. But I can tell 'ya this, ain't no ship left this port in the past few days. Too many monsters and all on the Sea," the man said as he turned to gaze over the pristine waters of

the Karagol Sea. "That is why we's waiting now. We need warriors to protect our sailors."

"Interesting. So *no* ships have left this port then?"

"Ain't that what I just said?" the sailor said with his lip slightly curled and his eyebrow raised and a look of annoyance and confusion adorning his facial features. "No ships have left heres in the past few days. If your boy did come past here, he would have known it was pointless and probably headed elsewheres."

"About those warriors," Tyson began, "Has anyone volunteered to protect the ship?"

"Sure. I mean, most of the peoples waiting here have tried to volunteer to get the ship moving so that theys can get to Tolbi. Not that any of thems *can* protect the ship. But no one that matches the description of your felon, if that's what you wanted to hear."

"I see… One more question. Are there any other ports around here where ships could have docked and left within the past few days?"

As the sailor thought for a moment, the gentle lapping of the Karagol water against the docks filled the silence between the men. The people had quieted down to a dull roar and were no doubt listening to the commotion with the bouncer and Tyson. After another moment of thought, the sailor snapped his fingers as if he remembered something.

"Wait! I did hears of another ship that left near here a few days ago. It was a privately owned merchant vessel that made port just southeast of Kalay. I guess that there was a private dock down at the Karagol Sound."

"That must be it! Thank you for your help." Tyson turned to his men. "Send word that we may know how Ryo disappeared! He is probably at sea this very moment. And as for the rest of us, we're off to the Karagol Sound!"

"Does that mean I get the monies?" the sailor as the men as they were already headed off.

Tyson turned and said, "That is if we capture him." The soldier smiled. *And I'll make sure that I do.*

Captain Hanruh sat in his chambers contemplating the decision that he had made some time ago concerning Knight, or Ryo, or whoever that kid was. He ran his hand across his face and along his rough facial hair as his thoughts dwelt on what he had done. He had done the right thing, right? But still, he was only a kid. What did it matter who he was? Fact was that he had protected his ship and saved the lives of his crew members not once but twice. Surely that was good enough to pardon whatever ill manner was in his past.

The stocky man stood to his feet and slowly sauntered to the nearby window in the back of his quarters. He looked out and beheld the scene once more as the turmoil of his choice ate away at his core. The seas seemed to have become less steady more turbulent ever since Knight was sentenced to the prison cell some four or five hours ago. The once pristine conditions of the ocean rapidly started to deteriorate the moment Knight was locked up.

Hanruh could not help but think that this was not just a coincidence. The moment that Ryo had been detained, everything seemed to feel uneasy — the sea, the crew members, even Raine. Everyone seemed to be uneasy and on edge, including the captain himself.

He recalled his order for his sailors to detain Knight for further questioning of his identity. Knight or Ryo or whatever his name is, glanced one last time around the deck before being led down to the cell holds. And his gaze was last fixated on him. As Ryo looked at Hanruh, a barely noticeable smirk cropped onto his face before he was gone and into the ship's inner depths. That smirk sent shivers down the captain's back.

With each passing moment, the waves appeared to increase from small swells to larger wakes with white crashing foam. Even now, the ship rocked back and forth from the unrelenting waves. A storm was approaching and from the looks of things, it would be a nasty one. They were too far from any island or town to dock and wait out the storm. So they were forced to pull up sail and wait. And that was something that he never was good at.

A knock at the door suddenly startled Hanruh. The captain kept his back facing the door but turned his head to see who could be knocking at his door.

"Come in."

When the door opened, Hanruh instantly recognized the face of the man. He was dressed in his fine silk garments of green and purple that he had worn many times before. His brown hair hung loosely on his head and some of it dipped down into his green colored eyes. The man carried with him a wooden cane that supposedly made him look more professional when he went about his work.

"Ahhh. Joliet. It's good to see you again," Hanruh said as he turned to face the man full front. "I was hoping to speak with you. Maybe you could set a few things straight for me." The

captain walked back to his table and extended his hand towards a chair. "Please, take a seat."

Joliet carefully shut the door and faced Hanruh, returning the respect shown to him by the aged captain. "I'd be delighted," the merchant chimed, taking a seat across from Hanruh. "So tell me, what do you need help with?"

"It's about that kid that you said was named Ryo. I know what you said but I just don't think..."

"Nonsense. This is *the* Ryo that is wanted by the Cyril military! You made the right decision. He is a dangerous criminal and needed to be locked up before he harmed any of your sailors or you," Joliet countered.

"'A dangerous criminal?' But he's only a kid barely into adulthood! How can he be considered dangerous enough to be wanted by the police? It doesn't make sense," Hanruh said in bewilderment.

"This kid is a murderer. You saw what he did to those pirates: he cleaved two of them in half! And I heard that he decapitated four people in his own hometown! And yet you say that he's not dangerous? I think that he's the most dangerous person on this boat!"

"He did what?" Hanruh leaned forward on the table interested. "He never told me this! How did you find out?"

"I have... connections. Regardless, you must see the danger in keeping him here."

Hanruh propped his head with his hands and nodded. "If what you say is true, about his hometown, then tell me... why hasn't done anything to harm me or my sailors?"

"Yet…" Joliet added quickly. "He hasn't done anything yet. But he may be biding time so that he can strike when you least expect it and take control of this ship."

"He couldn't operate a ship this size on his own! No one could! He wouldn't do that!"

"Oh! And what makes you so sure?"

"I…" the captain sighed. "I don't know."

The merchant got up from his chair and turned towards the door. "It's up to you what you want to do with him. Turn him in. Kill him. Or you may give him up to me so that he will no longer be a threat to the lives of the good people on this ship."

"Give him to you? What interest do you have in the boy?"

Joliet chuckled. "Personally, I *have* no interest in him." A smile made its way onto Joliet's face. "But, I know someone who does."

"Really? Who?"

"He's a man of great power and influence. He said that he's willing to pay far more than the Cyril military will. I can guarantee that. If you hand him over to me, then the reward is yours. It's your choice, but whatever choice you make benefits you."

Hanruh sat for a moment soaking in the words spoken to him. "How much more?"

"Double," Joliet said his eyes fixated on the captain. "So do we have a deal?"

The captain stared blankly at the merchant. *Double! 20,000 coins! Why so much? I couldn't accept that money, could I? But that's so much! It would come in handy with repairs and provisions.* Hanruh thought for a moment and made his decision.

"Make it thirty grand, and you got yourself a deal!"

"This place isn't like the inn. Is that smell from you?"

Ryo's remark went unanswered by the sentinel appointed to guard him who just scoffed and turned his face to the boy to show his disgust and then looked away.

"Fine, sorry I asked." The cell which held the blond was far less than comfortable. Being surrounded by a metal cage and being engulfed in darkness was not his idea of being welcomed either.

I'm welcome here, huh. What a joke. Ryo scoffed as he thought of what the captain had told him earlier. He looked around and could barely see through the relative darkness. The only light in his cell came from where the sentinel was on duty and from the cracks in the wood. As he looked through one of the cracks in the wood, Ryo saw the brilliance of the celestial body Luna. The pale light offered him some comfort as the smell of the ocean rose to his nostrils.

Ryo leaned back down on the hard-wooden cot which was not only cold but also too small to fit his lanky body. And within the past few minutes, the wooden planks below him began to collect water. The smell seemed to burn his lungs with each breathe he took. It was worse than anything he had smelled before.

Trying to take his mind off of the smell, Ryo looked through a small gap in the hull and saw the turbulent waves of the

ocean splashing up against the sides of the boat. The ship rocked violently up and down and side to side with each strike. With the wave increasing in size and strength, it was no wonder that the boat started to take in water. Maybe that was normal though.

Ryo smiled at the waters and then leaned back down on his uncomfortably hard bed. *We won't get to Xian any time soon. And to think that it only took a little encouragement to get the ocean to churn up a storm like this. But I'm exhausted. I might have over-exerted myself.* His smile disappeared as the emotions of loneliness and despair slowly crept into his heart. As he looked about his cell, all he saw was darkness. There was nobody to talk to. There was nobody around. Except for the guard, but he wasn't much for conversation. Ryo felt very alone. *What did I do to deserve this?*

Ryo thought back to when the pirates attacked. What really happened? His mind was blank right after they attacked. *Why don't I remember...?* He paused when the image of Joliet popped into his mind. *And just who are you anyways?*

A snort and a moan from the guard broke up Ryo's thoughts. The blond looked up to the guard by the door and noticed the man was barely awake. His head bopped down and then back up several times. He was trying to stay awake, but it looked like he was losing the battle.

I wonder if I could... I've read of a clan that could put someone to sleep with some kind of spell or something... Could he actually put him to sleep? He had nothing better to do so he figured it was worth a try.

Ryo lifted his hand towards the man, closed his eyes, and focused on trying to put the guard to sleep. The water from

the ocean seemed to call out to him to be used, but that wasn't it. His mind went from the outside to the inside as now the wooden boards seemed to call for his attention. That still wasn't it. He needed something more soothing. Like a gentle breeze. Then, Ryo felt it. A small stir in the energies in and around him.

That's it! Keep going... a voice seemed to echo in his mind. It was faint, but he heard it nonetheless; but it didn't seem to be his own voice somehow. Ignoring what he thought he heard, Knight began focusing his mind more, sensing the slight currents of air that churned down into the depths of the boat from the outside. The currents of air that flowed throughout the vessel were soothing, in a way, and...

Let's do this! Ryo thought thrillingly. His hand began to glow a soft blue color as his mind began to focus on his new discovery. Directing the energy towards the guard, Ryo slowly opened his eyes and saw what appeared to be small white particles of energy swirl about the man. A moment later, the guard stopped his head bopping and slumped asleep.

I did it! Ryo thought in near unbelief. *I did it!* He retracted his hand and examined it. *That was awesome! It wasn't actually that hard either! All I needed to do was concentrate and the rest came easy! Hmmm... I wonder what else I could do...* Just as that thought crossed his mind, the sound of plodding footsteps filled the narrow halls of the jail cell. The impending sound of those footsteps increased as the person trudged down the wooden stairway. Pretty soon, the thudding of the wooden steps turned into a splash as the man stepped down onto the floor. The sloshing of the water filled the air, but it soon stopped right in front of Ryo's cell. Ryo didn't even look at the person let alone say anything. The aura about this person was all too familiar.

"Ryouto Yanjan," Joliet said plainly.

Ryo turned slightly and looked back at the man. He merely smiled at the merchant trying not to let the man get to him. *Calm down, Ryo. He's just saying that.* "As I told everyone else, I'm Knight…"

"…Yarvon. Or that's what you want everyone to believe about you. But I… I know the truth about you. I know who you really are, and I know that you hail from Cyril. Right now, you're fleeing from there because you've been charged with that attack on your city a few days ago."

"You're well informed, Joliet," Ryo spat out. "What do you want?"

"I may be a merchant, but I have many connections." Joliet adjusted his fine clothing and grabbed a nearby stool and sat down upon it a few feet away from Ryo's cell. "All right then, I'll get right down to the point. Guard." The guard continued to sleep. "Hmph… O-o-okay…" Joliet sighed. "Guard! Wake up, damn you!"

The man woke up suddenly and shook on his stool. The man stood up suddenly and turned towards the source of the voice and saluted absentmindedly. Once he saw Joliet, though, he recognized the merchant instantly.

"Oh, Lord Joliet! What brings you here?" the man asked as he brought his hand down in embarrassment.

"Leave us for a moment!" Joliet answered coldly to the guard, not even bothering to look at the man.

"But, sir! Captain ordered me to stay…"

"Sailor, you will do as you are told. After all, I'm the one on this trip who is paying your captain who in turn is paying you. Besides, I only need a moment. Once I am done, you may resume your post."

"Right," the sailor said and then walked up the wooden stairs to the deck for some fresh air, hoping that a walk would keep him awake so that he would not be embarrassed like that again.

Once the guard was gone, Joliet waited for a moment to be sure and then turned towards Ryo. "Excellent. Now that he is gone…"

"You can kill me."

"No, no, not at all. You're far too valuable to kill. Besides, I just want to explain myself better. You see, as a merchant I have great wealth and I have been able to travel the countryside visiting town after town. I don't just want to be wealthy. I want more. I want to have power. The more towns and cities that I have laid my eyes upon the stronger my desire is to make them mine. I've tried to buy off countless governments and committees, and a surprising amount of them have accepted my… gifts. But not as many as I want."

"Not everyone can be bought off with money."

"And therein lies the problem. Although, I don't have any shortage of scum and lowlife who would act as my pieces to forge my ultimate goal. This crew wasn't hard to buy off. Gallahan was a bit more difficult, but he's just like the rest of them. Flash enough money and people will fall to your feet."

"How could you? You're using these men like pawns just for your own selfish interests? You… you've betrayed them! You've betrayed all of them! Even Gallahan, your most loyal

servant!" Ryo said with anger intertwined in his voice at the very thought of this man using people like they were just tools and then heartlessly throwing them away.

"No, no, not at all. After all, I am paying them for passage to Xian. And I haven't betrayed them at all." *At least, not yet.* Joliet thought. "And as for Gallahan, well, I don't require his services anymore. And, he's not exactly who you think he is."

"Oh? And what's that supposed to mean? Who exactly is Gallahan?" Ryo asked in mock surprise and interest. He did not believe anything that came from his mouth; however, something about this subject told him to inquire more. It was almost as if a voice was telling him to ask about Gallahan.

"I believe that you already know him. You may not have met him directly but you've no doubt met his… '*co-workers*.'" Joliet said that last word with a smirk on his face as if he knew something that Ryo did not.

"His 'co-workers'?" Ryo repeated in slight intrigue yet still with disgust. He was tired and getting agitated of playing these word games with Joliet and it showed on his face. "You know something about him that I don't, right? Who is he and who are these 'co-workers' that you speak of? Spill it!"

"I think that you should ask him yourself. You will get your answer. But I'm not inclined to tell you anything," Joliet said dodging the question.

Oh, no you don't! I won't let you retreat that easily! If you won't tell me, then I'll just have to probe your mind and find the answer myself. Now, Ryo, focus. Ryo closed his eyes and reached out with his mind, hoping to find some clue as to the true identity of Gallahan and why Joliet refused to tell him more.

Unfortunately, Joliet's mind was already off the subject of his bodyguard and off of what Gallahan had done. His mind was awfully cloudy and difficult to navigate through but Ryo managed to find one last residual thought about Gallahan receding quickly to the back of Joliet's mind.

"...*Zabuza...*"

Ryo broke off his mental link with the merchant and was the more confused. *Zabuza? Is that a name? Could Gallahan be leading another life as someone named Zabuza? Or could Gallahan be the false existence?*

"My offer to everyone is quite reasonable, I must admit," Joliet said as he stroked his chin, masterfully praising himself for his scheme.

"Offer?" Ryo inquired, stretching out with his mind to determine any more disturbing thoughts from Joliet.

"Yes. I offered them money in exchange for the use of their boat. If you think that this is the first time I've been with these men, you're mistaken." Joliet turned to the side and smiled menacingly. Ryo felt the sheer intense negative energy radiate from the merchant and it made his skin crawl.

"You still haven't told me what you want."

"Very well. You see, I need your help."

"My— my help…? What makes you think that I'd want to help you?"

"Simple... I want to offer you a chance at revenge."

Ryo raised an eyebrow. "Revenge? Why would I want revenge?"

"For your friends who rejected and made fun of you in the past. For the recent attack on Cyril that left your parents dead. For the accusations from your people that made you the exile that you will always be!"

Ryo froze in place when he heard what the merchant had just said. His mind reeled backwards when he finally comprehended what Joliet had just said. *How did he know about that, but more importantly, what exactly does he know?*

"What do you know about my life? You don't care about anyone but yourself and that's something that I should have realized from the very beginning when I first met you!"

"I know a lot about you, Ryo. I know how your so called 'friends' would treat you. I know how they only seemed to speak to you when they wanted something from you or when they wanted to make fun of you. I know that you spent countless evenings on the roof of your house wishing for the chance to leave. I also know how your parents treated you like you were still a little child. They made remarks about how you were worthless and that you would never amount to anything."

Once again, Ryo was paralyzed in the realization that this stranger was… right. How he knew all those things were a mystery. Joliet had nailed Ryo's feelings down so accurately that a deep shiver seemed to pass over his body.

"I know that you've been depressed as well. You've tried to make yourself become what other people would want, but that didn't seem to work. And for the longest time you've tried to work your way into the heart of a certain fair

maiden, correct? But nothing seemed to merit success. The times that you were alone with her never seemed to last very long; someone always seemed to interrupt your conversation and drive *you* away. But then, on the night when you two were about to connect, your city was attacked."

Slight feeling returned to Ryo and he managed to form a few words as painful memories that he had tried to hide came flooding back to his memory.

"How… how do you know all this?" Ryo asked in confusion as his body began to tremble slightly.

"I have many resources. You've struggled all your life just for a little bit of recognition and respect; but much to your dismay, you never got what you needed. Your friends did nothin' when you needed them the most. You were all alone at your darkest hour. But I can help you get what you want most…"

"What?"

"…even."

For a moment, Ryo thought about the merchant's offer. *Is that what I really want? To get even? To get revenge?* The struggle in his heart showed in his restless movements and on his face.

"And that one kid, Tyson, in a single gesture stole your woman away from you at your lowest hour and would have left you for dead. And you would have died if it was not for your girl Tinaro."

Ryo's eyes widened at the sound of specific names. Initially, he flashed with anger at the mention of Tyson's name and

what he did that night. But at the sound of Tinaro's name, Ryo's heart started to ache. He had not thought about her in a while. Memories of her beautiful radiance flooded his mind and he could see her in his mind's eye. She looked as impeccable as the day they first met.

"You could exact revenge upon those people in your life who made you miserable and who used you without regard. You could exact the same type of judgment upon countless others who have been put through the same hurt and agony that you were put through. All that I ask is that you join me and I can make you revenge a reality. With my resources and your skills, the possibilities are endless. What do you say? Are you with me?"

His offer was tempting. In fact, in reality, it was extremely tempting. One of the things that Ryo wanted most was to show others that he would not be pushed around any longer. And now, he had his opportunity to punish his oppressors, to make them pay for ever making fun of him. He could make those people who shunned him cower in fear at the very whisper of his name.

I— I can't do that! Can I? I've always wanted to show people that inside, I am more. And I certainly want to punish those bastards who always made fun of me. I can see the look on their faces when they are eating dirt. Ryo smiled, but only for a brief moment. His smile disappeared when someone else popped into his head. *But then again, what would Tinaro think of me? Would she approve?* Ryo sighed mentally. *Do I even have a chance with her?*

"I… don't know…" Ryo managed to answer both Joliet and his own thoughts. He didn't know whether he should accept or reject the proposal. He didn't know what Tinaro would think of him if she saw him now. He just… didn't know.

"I'll let you think about for the night. I shall hear your decision tomorrow night." Joliet turned to leave but was stopped by Ryo's voice.

"What if I don't join you?" Ryo asked. "What'll happen to me?"

Joliet turned his head back towards the boy and answered, "Let's just say that that would not be in your best interest. You know a lot, but no one on board will believe a word you say. I just hope, for your sake, that you make the right decision." And just as quickly as the merchant had arrived, he was gone leaving Ryo with the struggle of his decision.

Chapter 8: Ch 6: Old Memories, New Life

Chapter 6: Old Memories, New Life

"Tinaro! Time for dinner," an older woman called out to her young daughter who seemed to have lost most of her cheerfulness ever since Ryo had left nearly a week ago.

Tinaro was in her upstairs room looking out her bedroom window towards the city's entrance like so many times before hoping to catch a glimpse of the one who left her so suddenly that night so long ago. She had watched for Ryo every night since his departure hoping and praying that he would come back. But he had not come back. He was gone. Reality began to set into her heart and it hurt. Even though it had been nearly a week since his departure, it still felt like a bad dream. Any moment now she would wake up from that dream and everything would go back to normal. But, fact was, it wasn't a dream, and that's what hurt the most.

Why did you have to go? Tinaro thought to herself in frustration. She thought back to how brave he was in protecting her on that night. He had saved her life! And she owed him so much more than just her life.

"Tinaro, if you don't come now then your food is going to get cold!" a female voice yelled out from the downstairs dining area.

The girl looked back to her slightly open door and replied, "Okay, Mom! I'll be down in a second!" Tinaro turned back to look out her window. The light of Sol diminished as it dipped beneath the horizon making seeing anyone approach the gate increasingly more difficult. She looked out to a certain

spot between the inn and the gate. *That was the last time I saw him.* Her thoughts were overwhelmed with the thought of what… of whom she had lost. She had never realized just how much he meant to her until he was gone. It seemed like he had been gone for years.

Tears streaked down from her eyes and doused her cheeks in the sorrow that she felt so many times before as she continued to gaze outside at the setting colors of the evening light of Sol. She recalled conversations with many of her friends who tried in vain to comfort and console her. But a conversation with Ryo's closest friend Daishi revealed that she was not the only one taking Ryo's departure heavily.

~Flashback~

"Are you all right?" Daishi asked as he approached Tinaro from behind.

"Yeah," Tinaro sighed as she gently wiped any sign that she could (and probably would) cry from her eyes. "It's just so hard to believe that he's gone."

A moment of silence passed between the two friends as they walked together down the street with nowhere in particular to go. The afternoon sun cast shadows from the trees and nearby buildings across their path. The bustle of the city filled the void of silence between the two friends.

"I was thinking about him and what he must be doing right now. I mean, he's *our* age and he's out there all alone with no one to help him! I couldn't imagine…" Tinaro trailed off and shuddered in realization of his situation, of being all alone.

"Yeah. But, come on. He's Ryo. He'll get through it," Daishi replied with nonchalance.

"'He'll get through it'! Daishi, he has no one to depend on! And on top of that, he's being hunted like a criminal because he's being accused of being the one responsible for organizing the attack on us! I know that he didn't do it! He couldn't have! He saved my life!"

"But… what they're saying about him…" Daishi countered somewhat timidly.

"It's not true! I know what the military has said about him. But he didn't do anything wrong," Tinaro countered, feeling the tears beginning to rush to her eyes.

Daishi sighed and looked at the ground. "To be honest, I wasn't sure what to believe. But if you are that sure about him, then I guess that I can be too." Daishi looked up at her and smiled. "Besides, who would want to take orders from him?"

Tinaro looked at Daishi and finally cracked a smile. "That wasn't very nice!" Tinaro gave the boy a playful hit in the arm. "Even though that was kind of funny, take it back."

"Oww… Okay you win!" Daishi conceded as he rubbed his arm as if it hurt. "But still, it doesn't seem possible that Ryo would be responsible for this."

She sighed as she looked up into the clouded sky. "I heard from Tyson that they got two different tips from somebody blaming the attack on Ryo," Tinaro said quietly.

"What?" Daishi exclaimed. "I didn't hear that! Tips from who?"

"I don't know," Tinaro said quivering. "Tyson said that both tips were anonymous and both were from two different people. That's why I think the military is after Ryo. It's because of those notes. I asked Tyson to let me see them but he said he couldn't. He said that those notes were too vital to allow the public to see. But something didn't seem right."

"What do you mean?"

"He was very…" Tinaro paused to search out the right word. "…forceful about me *not* seeing the notes."

"So?" Daishi said not seeing the significance. "I'd just go in there and…"

"Daishi… I think that Tyson is trying to hide something."

"Come on! You're just being paranoid. Besides, I'm sure that there are things that they aren't allowed to talk about."

"But, Daishi, this is about Ryo! What do they have to hide? This is your friend! This is… my friend…"

"I'm sorry. It's just that I…" He paused and hesitated revealing how he truly felt and quickly countered with another statement. "I-i-it just doesn't make any sense to me."

Tinaro did not answer him nor did she seem to hear him. She continued to look down and all around trying not to make eye contact knowing that if she did make eye contact that she would probably cry tears of sorrow.

"I… uh… actually kind of miss him being around… It's weird…" Daishi looked at Tinaro watching her reaction. Something in her eyes seemed to scream a singular thought. "You miss him too, don't you?"

Tinaro nodded and spoke softly. "Yeah… I miss him a lot! Every day I wonder where he is and what he's doing out there! Daishi, I miss him more than I thought that I would," Tinaro replied in a slight whimper as the memory of Ryo still burned in her memory and in her heart. "I miss him every day…"

Daishi breathed out in a huff as he watched her as she said what she did. There was definitely more to it than that. "Is that all?"

"What do you mean?" Tinaro asked confused as she felt her face slowly flush red.

"I'm just saying. Did you… *like* him?" Daishi asked cautiously, hoping that he had not crossed the line between being concerned and being nosey.

Tinaro was taken aback by his question and felt her face completely turn red. "Wha- No, of course not! I mean, we are friends and all and he has helped me many times before, but that doesn't mean anything!"

"I can see it in your eyes." Daishi smiled and shrugged his shoulders as he said, "Besides, you're being awfully defensive about it. Admit it… you liked him didn't you!"

There was no denying her feelings for him. She did indeed like Ryo. He was what every girl dreams of in a man. "Well… Yea…" she answered sheepishly. "I did like him! And I still do!"

"Do you think that he liked you?" Daishi pressed.

A short pause of her thinking back preceded Tinaro's answer. "I-I think he did. Well, I mean, he never said that he did, but…" Tears began to well up in the girl's eyes as she

thought about her relationship with Ryo. She thought back to the last time they had been together and the very close, intimate kiss that the two of them had shared before he left her life forever.

"He saved your life. I'd say that he liked you," Daishi responded. "Maybe even more than just friends. He was willing to *die* for you. I'd be willing to bet that he even *loved* you."

His words struck deep into Tinaro's heart as true. Somehow, someway she knew his words to be true. Her encounters with him every day, during and even after the attack should have been evidence enough; however, she had not even considered **that** possibility. And to finally her someone else say it seemed to make it even more clear that they both loved each other.

"Do… do you really think so?" Tinaro asked quietly.

There was a long pause between question and answer. Daishi finally said, "I do think so. It was always clear that you two had something special going on. For a while, it made me kind of jealous. But I think that you two would be great together. Me and him have been great friends for a long time. And I could see it in him too. Whenever I'd talk about you to him his face would always get red. It was kind of funny."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's just really hard now knowing that he's not here."

Both of them missed Ryo terribly and neither one knew exactly what to say to console the other until Daishi spoke up.

"I guess all that we can do is hope and pray that he's okay and that he'll come back," Daishi said, trying to give her some comfort.

The promise that Ryo gave to Tinaro the night he left town suddenly sprang into her mind. "Yeah. I'm sure that he'll come back. And I'll be waiting for him when he does..."

Because he promised me that he would come back... And he wouldn't break his promise... I think...

~End Flashback~

A gentle breeze blew in from the countryside and in through the window chilling Tinaro instantly, bringing her back from her thoughts. Tinaro wrapped her cloak around her body to try to stay warm. The weather today seemed particularly chilly.

"I'm still waiting for you and I just wish that I could have told you how I really felt about you, Ryo. I miss you and I… truly… love you." Those last words fell from her mouth and kind of surprised her. But that was the truth. She could not deny her feelings for him anymore. *I wish that I could have realized this sooner. But when he comes back, I'll make sure that he knows how much he really means to me.* The thought brought a certain degree of comfort to her troubled soul.

Tinaro rose up from her sitting position and turned to head downstairs to go eat. But for some reason she felt the urge to glance out her window one more time. Suddenly, a dark figure came into view across the horizon from where Ryo had disappeared. A flicker of hope sparked in Tinaro's soul as she hoped and prayed that the person approaching was her dearest and best friend Ryo. She jumped up from her window seat and dashed from her room down the stairs.

"What's all this?" her mother shouted. "Where're you going?"

"Ryo might be coming back! I have to go see!" Tinaro said excited as she felt tears of joy streaking down her face. She burst from her house and stopped at the gate to be reunited her knight. She waited anxiously for the figure to approach. *I hope it's him!* She thought excitedly.

The one figure off in the distance, though, turned into many figures. And as they got closer, Tinaro say that they were all dressed in the traditional Cyril soldier force uniforms. And the sole figure she had thought was Ryo turned out to be none other than Tyson. He had finally come back after his pursuit of Ryo in the city of Kalay. Tinaro gasped at not seeing who she expected. But with his return maybe he would tell her some good news. Maybe Ryo was amongst the throng of soldiers behind Tyson! With both eagerness and desperation, Tinaro searched the crowd of men to see if Ryo were bound within their midst.

Tyson approached the gate and addressed the girl. "Tinaro? Well, long time no see!" Tyson said with excitement at seeing the beautiful young lady waiting for him (or so he thought).

"Where's Ryo?" Tinaro asked bluntly as she wiped her face with her sleeve.

"Oh…" Tyson paused for a moment and tried to think up a good excuse for why he had not found the fugitive. Suddenly, an idea popped into his head. He sighed as he thought of what he was about to do. "I… uh… have bad news." Tyson took a deep breath. "It seems that he fled to Kalay and boarded a ship. It headed out before we could get to him. Unfortunately, as I tried to get a ship to chase him, a

storm came rolling in from off the ocean. The locals said that any ship caught in a storm this bad would not have made it out on the sea. I'm terribly sorry," Tyson said grimly. He hadn't lied about the storm. That was real enough. He did find the dock over at the Karagol Sound and it did look like a ship had left port within a day or two. But he did fib on whether or not the ship that left was still in one piece and even if Ryo were aboard it. But it didn't matter. Ryo wasn't coming back. And with him gone, Tyson could take the opportunity to move closer to Tinaro and comfort the girl as she grieved the loss of her friend.

Tinaro stared blankly at Tyson and stepped back in unbelief. Her eyes widened and her eyes began to water. She dropped to her knees in overwhelming sorrow and grief, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Ryo… No… It can't be…" The few tears that she initially shed soon began to flow from her eyes uncontrollably as she wept bitterly for her friend. "Ryo!" Tinaro covered her face. *I lost you for good now, Ryo…*

Tyson was taken aback by her response as he was not quite expecting such a reaction. He leaned down on the ground with the girl and gently placed his hand on her shoulder. Tinaro responded by wrapping her arms around the soldier and continued to mourn the loss of her friend. As Tyson looked down at the sorrow and grief that his partial lie had caused, he made a vow. *I promise, Tina, that I will never lie to you again. And I'll always be here for you.*

Ryo, or Knight, had needless to say a very sleepless night. The offer from Joliet kept running through his mind. Revenge. Revenge. Revenge. Is that what he really wanted? Is that the purpose of his life on Weyard? Is that the answer that he had been seeking all this time?

The more and more he thought about it the more and more he didn't want to think about it. He had to do something to take his mind off of the inevitable decision. When the time came to decide, he'd decide then. At least for now, that was the plan.

His time was more occupied with some of the incredible things that he had done within the past few days. Ryo was able to devout a lot of his time to focusing on his powers and how to control them and summon them at a moment's notice. Since he was locked up and surrounded by wood, metal, and an entire ocean, Ryo decided that his cell would make a good training ground.

He thought back to his first encounter with Raine and what the boy was able to do. Though he spent a few hours at it, Ryo was able to perfectly manipulate the water technique but with four strands of water spiraling around both arms rather than just two strands up one arm. In addition to what he had already done, Ryo was able to let lightning bolts dance from his fingertips, summon small orbs of fire, manipulate the water at his feet, and even draw out moisture from the air. He could also bend the wood fibers of the boat and float small splinters of wood in the air with relative control. He had actually a good amount of control with each element that he practiced with.

However, with using his elemental powers so much, he became very tired. But despite how tired he became, he just couldn't seem to rest. There was just too much going on in his head for him to rest. In those times, Ryo would just sit and meditate. But he wouldn't do that for long. A few minutes later, Ryo would be back at trying out something he had just thought of or perfecting one of the other things that he had done. It was about a little after midday when he had his first visitor.

"You seem to be doing well."

Ryo turned around suddenly at the sound of the voice to see standing in the water logged floor boards a few feet from his cell a man dressed in a familiar outfit. His silver staff leaned against his body underneath his crossed arms.

"Gallahan?" Ryo's eyes narrowed at the man. "Where have you been hiding? And what do you want?" Just then, Ryo thought about how Gallahan had suddenly appeared behind him. *How did he do that? I didn't even hear him splash in the water! The whole floor is water logged! Any normal person would have splashed in the water on his way over to this cell. But he didn't! Just who is this guy anyways! I hate to admit it, but, Joliet was right, for once: there's something dark and mysterious about this man.*

"I've… been around." Gallahan laughed as he reached over for the nearby stool. It was the same stool that the guard from last night sat on.

"Answer my question!" Ryo demanded feeling his muscles tighten.

"Hmph. I thought I did…" Gallahan shrugged.

"No! What's the real reason you came to see me?"

Gallahan sneered at the boy. "Very well. I see that you like to get straight down to the point. I came because I wanted to help you."

"Huh? Help me?" Ryo paused for a moment absorbing what he had just said. "Why would I need help from you? I barely even know you!"

"Because without my help, you'll die."

Ryo raised an eyebrow and felt his muscles tense for action. "Is… is that a threat?" Beads of sweat formed on Ryo's brow and slowly rolled down his cheek.

"Take it how you will." Gallahan leaned back against the back set of cages. "I merely wish to offer you your freedom. But, if you'd rather not, then…" Gallahan shifted his weight forward and stood up turning to leave.

"Hold it!" Ryo said. "What do you mean exactly?"

Gallahan turned slightly to the caged blond. "Tonight… is when it'll happen."

He's being awfully vague. Ryo thought. "What'll happen?"

"A mutiny."

"What? What are you talking about?" Ryo gasped in surprise.

"Those loyal to the captain will be killed along with him."

"But why? The captain's tried nothing but to atone for what he's done. He's trying to make up for his mistakes!"

"That's not how the crew feels. They feel dissatisfied with the direction that he's taken them. And a number of them despise the captain for ruining the lives of their parents to chase pirates that couldn't be caught. The lives of the men and women aboard this ship can never be brought back and the crew demands vengeance. But, that's not all." Gallahan turned to face the boy and smiled grimly. "A number of them know about who you really are and are going to cash in the bounty on your head. No doubt in all the chaos and dispute over who gets the bounty money, you'll be killed."

Ryo sat back completely stunned. *How?* He asked himself mentally. *How do they know about me?* Ryo thought back for a moment and suddenly remembered bumming into a man that mentally said something about a bounty. *Him. That man knew who I was! He must be the one organizing all this. But I can't remember what he looked like!* Ryo looked up at the messenger of this bad news and had another thought. *But, how does Gallahan know all this?* After the initial shock, Ryo cleared his throat and tried to swallow the rather large lump in the back of his throat. "Tell me, how do you know all of this?"

"I thought I told you. I've been around," Gallahan sneered. "Sailors love to gossip."

"Right…" Ryo said doubtfully. "And where in all this mess do I need your help?" Ryo asked casually as if everything was all right. However, the events of the mutiny and the debate over his bounty already began to play out in his head. He shivered at the thought of the bloodshed and rage of the evening to come. In fact, everything was not fine.

"I can help you gain your freedom. But, once you have it, what will you do with it?"

"Wh… what?"

"You can't go back to your hometown if they've exiled you, now can you?"

"How do you know…"

"I'm an expert at gaining information." Gallahan smiled a smile that looked more like a smirk.

More like expert eavesdropper. But still… Ryo paused. *He's… he's right. Even if I wanted to go back, I can't. They'd just*

lock me up or worse... Going back home to my old life would be impossible. And if I stay here then they'll probably kill me just for the money that's on my head.

"What help can you offer me? It's not like..." Ryo stopped when something came flying through the bars of the cell. Acting on reflex, he reached out and caught the object. It chinked with a metallic sound as it was caught in his hand. Instantly, Ryo recognized that this was his confiscated sword.

"Why are you so interested in helping me out?" Ryo asked with raised eyebrow as he looked up at the man who had already turned his back on him.

"You can either choose to help with the mutiny or be killed in the chaos."

"Just who are you anyway?"

Gallahan merely huffed and slowly walked down the hall and then up the stairs and out of view. The sound of his steps soon faded leaving Ryo with his sword, his thoughts, and his next decision.

For the next few minutes he sat there thinking. Then he laid his eyes on his sword and gently stroked the violet linen handle and the intricate hand guard. His fingers slowly traced the curve of the sheath feeling the smoothness of the glossy finish. He gripped the sheath on either end with both hands and closed his eyes and relaxed, trying to forget about his decision if just for a moment. He slowed his breathing and breathed much deeper and exhaled much longer. He slowly emptied his mind hoping to just forget about everything. And for a few brief moments, it worked.

Suddenly, an image flashed in his mind. It happened so quickly that Ryo lost his concentration and breathing rhythm. But after he regained composure, he focused once again falling back into the meditative state. Once again the image flashed through the dark confines of his mind. It didn't catch him off guard this time. Instead of shunning the image, Ryo focused harder on the image. The image turned into a scene between two people that were having a conversation in a dimly lit room.

The image was fuzzy and the faces of the individuals were hard to see. The voices started off very unclear and Ryo was only able to initially hear a word or two.

"... *Ryo... Cyril police... He is... criminal..."*

What? Ryo exclaimed mentally. *Did I just hear what I thought I just heard?* Ryo focused more hoping to catch the entire conversation. The scene before him became clearer and he instantly recognized the faces of both men in the room. *The captain! And... Joliet!*

Ryo listened in on the conversation with great interest as Joliet and Captain Hanruh exchanged a few words back and forth. Joliet then stood to his feet and made his final comments.

"*It's up to you what you want to do with him. Turn him in. Kill him. Or you may give him up to me so that he will no longer be a threat to the lives of the good people on this ship."*

Ryo was suddenly struck with confusion but thankfully, Hanruh addressed the issue that confused Ryo.

"*Give him to you? What interest do you have in the boy?"*

Exactly! Ryo exclaimed mentally.

"*Personally, I have no interest in him." A smile made its way onto Joliet's face. "But, I know someone who does."*

Again, Ryo was confused by what Joliet had said. Someone was interested in him? Who? And for what purpose? And why him? Ryo's attention was drawn back to the vision as Joliet explained himself, quite vaguely at that.

"*He's a man of great power and influence. He said that he's willing to pay far more than the Cyril military will. I can guarantee that. If you hand him over to me, then the reward is yours. It's your choice, but whatever choice you make benefits you."*

"No…!" Ryo said aloud as he felt his mouth practically drop to the floor. His mental eyes widened as he watched and listened on. The image began to grow fuzzy as Ryo was slowly losing his focus. He clenched his fists and felt a familiar fire welling up inside of his soul.

"*How much more?"* the captain responded.

Wait! He's not going to accept this offer… is he? Ryo gasped. He felt his body begin to quiver and shake, whether from fear or anger he wasn't sure. But he leaned more toward anger.

"*Double. So do we have a deal?"*

The vision was fading fast and the voices becoming more distant as Ryo slowly lost his focus on the image. His body was shaking. Just what was this anyways? Right before the vision completely faded, Ryo heard the fading words of the captain's response.

"*Make it thirty grand, and you got yourself a deal!"*

Ryo's focus had been completely lost and the vision of the two disappeared into darkness. A soft blue glow began to spread along and around his arms and down towards his hands. As Ryo clenched his hands around his sword, the blue glow dissipated and small particles spread out from his fist and disappeared into the air.

As the blond slowly opened his eyes, his piercing violet eyes shot across the room like a lightning fast arrow. There was no doubting what he felt now. *I'll make them pay for ever trying to cross me. They smiled at me and called me their "friend"? But now they try to conspire against me!*

"No more…" Ryo's deep, dark tone of voice echoed. As he tightened his grip on his sword, a strange yet powerful energy seemed to flood into his body, heightening his senses. "I… will take no more… I won't let them use me! It's time that I change things!"

His fists clenched in a frustration as he narrowed his eyes toward the stairs leading to the deck. He could no longer sit idly around anymore — action was deemed necessary.

"It ends tonight…!" Ryo then suddenly paused as he thought about his statement. All his life up until this point he had been known by the name of Ryouto Yanjan. He had lived a simple peaceful life and had grown up just like any other kid. He'd made friends and avoided making enemies. His life seemed to be a perfectly normal life. However, Fate seemed to conspire against him. With the loss of his parents, a place to call home, his freedom, he now had a difficult choice to make. In his defense he had created a name. He had created a person behind the new name. But his situation compelled him to make a choice between these two very different lives.

To be that same kid back in Cyril who was fearful and timid in front of people; or, to be a man who was bold and fearless even in the face of certain death. Two names. Two lives. Two people. But only one choice could be made. It was a choice between his old life or his new one. But only one could exist.

Ryo couldn't help but smile as he spoke quietly to himself as he made his decision. "...It begins tonight!"

Chapter 9: Ch 7: A Different Kind of Mutiny

Chapter 7: A Different Kind of Mutiny

The light of the sun faded quickly as the last rays of light illumined the sky with the majestic colors of dusk. From the front of the ship, Captain Hanruh had watched the sun fade over the horizon and stood in awe of the beauty of what he beheld. Besides the helmsman who steered the ship, Hanruh stood alone on deck admiring the colors of the setting sun. He had given his crew time off to rest and relax, except for the helmsman.

As instructed, as in times past, the helmsman had a course set for a small island off the southeastern continent of Angara. But after the encounter with the pirates, they were way off course. In fact, they had been heading practically away from their destination! But Hanruh set them back on course and figured out that they had lost at least two days journey because of the pirate encounter. From his estimates, they were somewhere between the southeastern Angara island and the north Osenia island. It would take at least another five days to reach the continent of Angara, unless they got a good wind. But hopefully in those five days (or less) they would not encounter any more pirates.

A cooling ocean breeze blew across the deck bringing a salty, yet refreshing sensation that can only be experienced on the ocean. The captain breathed in and heaved a heavy sigh not even noticing that his sailors slowly began to emerge from below deck and onto the deck. At first there were only a few and they made very little noise. But as more and more people came up on deck the noise of them alerted

Hanruh to their presence. Hanruh turned around to see what was going on and saw all of his sailors on deck.

"Wha— What's this?" Hanruh stuttered. "What's going on?"

One sailor, a tall, dark haired man stepped forward. He was at least six feet tall and had spiked black hair. He was skinny but was not weak. As he crossed his arms across his chest and lifted his chin up into the air, the muscles in his arms tensed revealing that he had some muscle behind his lean frame. His face was plain and his facial features seemed to be sunken into his face and drooping slightly. He just had the look of a troublemaker.

"We need ta talk," the sailor said toughly with a smug grin.

"About what, Rymil?" Hanruh asked raising an eyebrow as he identified the sailor.

Rymil chuckled and shook his head. As he stepped forward his arms loosened from their crossed position and he smiled a sickly type of grin. He walked with a swagger as he raised his chin up high into the air. He stepped to the right (the captain's left) side and sneered, "You know what this is about." He paced around behind the captain. "This is about our payment! This is about what's fair for us!"

Hanruh nervously watched as Rymil paced around behind. "What are you—!"

"This is about what we deserve!" Rymil screamed in the face of the captain. The grunts of affirmations echoed from the crowd of sailors. Rymil stepped around from behind the captain and was now on the captain's right side. Suddenly, Rymil threw a fist into Hanruh's stomach making the man stumble to his knees and gasp for breath. "That's what you

deserve for what you've done to us! For what you put us through! For what your father put us through!"

The pain in Hanruh's stomach lanced throughout his body. It felt as though the punch was boring a hole through his body and out his back. He felt a throbbing unlike anything he'd felt before. The pain seemed to travel throughout his body affecting more than just his stomach and lungs. Hanruh had to gasp for each breath because the wind had literally been punched out of him. He felt like throwing up, but it also felt that doing that would make things worse. He stumbled back to his feet holding his stomach and hunched over like a much older man than what he really was.

"What… do you… want…?" Hanruh managed to wheeze out in between gasps of air.

"'What do we want?' We want something more than what you've offered us. We want treasure. We want to be rich! Enough of these silly transport jobs! We want gold!" Most of the sailors grunted in affirmation while some others cheered. There was general agreement amongst the sailors about the things Rymil just expressed.

"How am I supposed to do that?" Hanruh asked Rymil and the sailors on deck. "I'm not wealthy by any means, and I can't just use my compass to find the nearest treasure! I can't look for something having no idea where it was or where to look for it! It would be a waste of time!"

The boisterous crowd of sailors who were once noisy, talking amongst themselves, and agreeing with Rymil suddenly got quiet. Not a word was uttered, not even as a whisper. The deck was eerily silent and the only sound that was heard was the gentle crash of the ocean against the ship. The tension in the air seemed to thicken as dozens of eyes

shifted toward the front of the ship where Hanruh stood. Still no one spoke as the seconds passed by. A chilling evening breeze blew across the top of the deck as the silence continued.

Rymil turned his back on Hanruh to look at the crowd of sailors; they all seemed to convey the same feeling that he had. He nodded. "Is that right?" he said finally breaking the silence as his hand plunged into his shirt. He turned his head around slightly to see the captain out of his peripheral vision. "It would be a waste of time, eh? Hmph. Isn't that interesting." Rymil turned to face Hanruh and pulled his hand out of his shirt. In his right hand was something small. The rough edges glimmered in the moonlight. It was... a dagger!

"Don't you remember?" Rymil sneered bitterly as his lips curled. "Don't you remember what you did to our fathers? To us?" Rymil slashed across and caught the captain across the cheek with his blade. "You cost us so much for your revenge! Your foolishness cost our fathers their lives! You wasted our time! You wasted our lives! And for that you must..."

"What are you doing? What's going on?" a voice cried out from the crowd. The sailors parted to allow a young man with aqua colored hair to pass quickly through their midst.

"Ahh! Raine! It's nice of you to finally join us. I was just having a... civil... conversation with the captain," Rymil remarked with a sneer as he backed away from the hunched over captain.

Raine laid a hand on the captain's shoulder to see if he was alright. The captain had streaks of blood running down his cheek from the wound he had just received. "And by 'civil' I assume you mean assaulting an unarmed man!" Raine said

through gritted teeth as he shot a narrowed glance at Rymil. "How low can you get!"

"You knew that this was coming to him!" countered Rymil. "Ever since this fool took command of this ship! He deserves to be punished for what he's done! He deserves to be overthrown!"

The other sailors roared in agreement as the atmosphere thickened with tension and as a light mist started blanketing the ship.

"This man, our 'captain,' has done nothing to make *our* lives better!" Rymil turned and continued speaking. "He has taken the best for himself and left *us* with nothing! In fact, he makes us do all the work while he sits back and does nothing! And he still gets paid? With our hard earned effort? How fair is that? How low can *he* get!"

The cheers from the crowd became an uproar as each man raised his arms into the air with great shouts of affirmation of what their "leader" had said. The mist, meanwhile, had thickened even more becoming a denser fog. No one seemed to notice though because they were all so busy rallying for justice to be served. Every sailor jeered and mocked the captain as they all demanded their just dues.

"He's done nothing *but* try to help you all! Don't you all see that?" Raine shouted amid the throng. But no one heard him. The voice of the mob was too great and their minds already made up. When each man produced a small dagger, there became absolutely no doubt about their intentions were now. They had been planning mutiny. And tonight was the night.

The men circled around and surrounded Raine and the captain corning them at the front of the ship. Some of the

bigger, more burly men began cracking their knuckles in their fists with great anticipation of what was to follow. Others palmed clubs while most others wielded small daggers. But all had eyes filled with rage and consumed with one thought: mutiny.

"Wait!" pleaded the captain as he raised his arms up defensively. "Wait! I'll do whatever you guys want!"

"'Whatever we want?'" Rymil said with raised eyebrow.

"Yes! I know that I've made mistakes in the past, but I want to make up for them now by helping you all! I'm sorry for what I've done…!"

"Hmph! Not as sorry as you're gonna be!" Rymil screamed as he raised his dagger high into the air.

"Enough of this!"

A new voice called out from the back of the ship. Rymil stopped in mid-air and the other men hushed and turned to look. The crowd soon began to part their ways and through the solid white fog emerged a figure that was lavishly dressed. He carried himself through the crowd with suave and dignity, although some of the men thought otherwise. It could only be one person.

"Joliet? What are you doing here?" Rymil asked as his emotions rose to the point of irritation that he'd been interrupted. "What do you want?"

The man slowly sauntered up towards Rymil with his hands clasped in front of him. "I have something that many of you will be most interested in. And I figured now will be as good a time as any." Joliet slowly reached for something underneath his lavish clothing and pulled out what

appeared to be a scroll. He then lifted his eyes upon across the mob of sailors and lifted the scroll above his head.

"What the - !"

"I have here..." Joliet interrupted Rymil's no doubt foul remark. "I have here the scroll of Osenia which details the location of one of the greatest treasures hidden in this ocean."

"What?" Rymil scoffed in unbelief. "You're lying to us! There's no such scroll!"

"The island is called Treasure Island and it holds a vast amount of wealth collected over centuries of time," Joliet continued as if not even hearing what Rymil had to say. All ears were intently listening to what the merchant had to say. "As a merchant, I've traveled to many different places and heard many different stories and rumors. And I've come across many different artifacts, some forged and some authentic. It wasn't until I came across this authenticated scroll that I was convinced that all the rumors about this island are true. The scholars at Tolbi can confirm its authenticity. I've heard that the treasure spoken about in this scroll was the largest stockpile of wealth collected before the Golden Age ended."

Whispers began to spread throughout the crowd of sailors. Each man talked amongst his fellow laborer as they discussed this new information. The prospect of wealth excited the once blood thirsty sailors and their attitudes changed, slightly.

Rymil still was not convinced. "Why haven't you gone after the treasure then if it's so great?"

Joliet smiled. "I am a mere merchant, not a sailor. The journey will be a hard one. For me, the journey would be more than I could probably bear. But for hardened sailors like yourselves, the journey should be no problem."

"Even still, you could have hired a group of men who could withstand the journey and help you acquire this treasure," Rymil countered. *Something doesn't seem right, but I can't place what it is…*

"True. But I'm getting older and have already acquired more money than I could ever spend. What profit would it be for me to acquire even more wealth that I couldn't possibly spend on top of the amount that I can't spend now?"

"Well… I…"

"Besides, this is my gift to you all for your services these past many years."

Why do I still feel so uneasy about his proposal? Rymil grit his teeth. "But… What's the catch? How do we know that that's even a real place and that there really is treasure there? And why are you being so helpful all the sudden?"

"My son," Joliet said warmly placing his hand on the man's shoulder. "That's just who I am." The merchant smiled and turned to face the sailors. "As the scroll says, the journey to this place is a most dangerous one. I've been told countless times that those who have pursued the treasure have never returned. However, I have no doubt in my mind that you all will succeed; and when you do, you'll be the richest men alive. You shall have your names written in the annals of history and you shall all be the most powerful, influential men in all of Weyard!"

An eerie silence filled the air. Only the splashing of the waves against the boat could be heard. The air itself was thick with water vapor, yet it was refreshingly chilly. Prospects of wealth filled the minds of all the men who had heard Joliet. A covetous grin arose on many faces as each man envisioned his own unique story about what he would do with the treasure. All except Rymil.

Joliet allowed his words to sink in for a moment and raised his voice once more. "Once my work with you all is done, then this scroll and the treasure is yours." He turned one last time towards the leader, Rymil. "I leave this in your capable hands. Maybe this be a token of my sincerity and good will."

The man handed the scroll over to Rymil and left the same way he came, disappearing into the depths of the ship. Everyone on deck simply stared at the scroll that Rymil held in his right hand. Rymil himself was staring blankly at the rolled up parchment. But his blank stare soon turned to a look of indifference and then to disbelief. However, when he looked up, that was not the same aura that his fellow sailors gave off.

"Let's see it!" someone yelled out from the crowd.

"Yeah! Open the scroll! Let's get this treasure!" another cried out.

"Come on!" The sailors pressed closer and closer to Rymil.

The man raised his voice in protest saying, "It's a lie! He's playing all of you! Can't you see it?"

"Open the scroll!" came the fevered shout. "Stop stalling!"

Raine and the captain shrank back against the railing and slowly crept away from Rymil as far as they could. They saw

the sailors who were so bent on killing the captain surround Rymil all clamoring for a peek at the scroll.

As Raine watched the scene unfolding before his eyes, he couldn't help but thank the gods that Joliet arrived when he did. Now instead of going after Hanruh, the sailors were going after Rymil. Raine smirked, deciding to add more fuel to the fire.

"He's trying to keep it for himself!" the boy shouted above the crowd. That one statement sent the sailors into a frenzy. They all rushed Rymil with the fury of an untamed mob. Their daggers and knives and swords were no longer pointed at the captain but at him. This… was a different kind of mutiny.

Joliet casually passed through the ranks of the sailors and towards the stairs to the lower deck. Each face that he passed, every pair of eyes followed him as he passed by them. Looking at each sailor became increasingly difficult due to the thick cloud that had encompassed the ship. But Joliet cared not about that. A chill arched throughout Joliet's body as he passed through the fog and finally made it to the stairs. He took one last look towards the front of the ship; however, the fog had become so thick that it concealed the entire front of the ship. Even the closest sailor who stood merely five feet away could not be seen. Plus it being dark did not help either. Regardless, Joliet shook his head and descended into the depths of the ship. He had other things to do than to worry about them.

The merchant grabbed a nearby lantern and descended the stairs. He had one last stop to make. "Everything's going according to plan." A moment later when he finally reached the prison block, he took a step down onto the floor expecting to feel the cooling sensation of water tingling his

feet. However, when he stepped down he instantly noticed that the floor was completely dry. There wasn't a spot of water on the floor at all! This was so surprising that Joliet paused and even lowered the lantern to confirm that there was indeed no water!

"Hmph. That's odd…" Joliet said peculiarly as he looked at the floor. He took a few cautious steps forward still marveling at the lack of water on the normally wet floor; suddenly the resonating hum of metal echoed from shadows behind him.

"Looking for someone," spoke the deep voiced spirit.

Joliet froze. However, if he was afraid or fearful, Joliet betrayed none of these or any other emotions. In fact, the only expression he betrayed was the slightest smirk. "I hadn't expected you to be out of your cell."

The spirit chuckled darkly. "Not everything goes according to plan now, does it?"

Joliet laughed. "Hmph. I guess not." He took a quick glance towards the cell which once confined the spirit. In the dim light granted by the lantern in his right hand, Joliet saw that all the prison bars remained uncut. The door to the prison cell remained on its hinges. There were no holes that could be seen in the floorboards or in the ceiling. But, without a doubt, the person that was once inside the cell was indeed gone. "I must say… I'm impressed that you managed to escape your cell. So tell me… how'd you do it?"

The spirit behind him spoke not a word to Joliet's sarcastic tone. He instead narrowed his eyes and firmed his grip on his sword. Sweat dripped from his face as he smirked at the vulnerable position he had the merchant in. He was at his mercy. No more of his games.

Joliet, with his back still turned to his assailant, broke the silence. "Well…?" Turning his head back slightly, Joliet smirked at the spirit behind him seeing only flicking shadows dance across the face of his assailant. Though the lantern dimly lit the room, Joliet recognized the small portion of the face of the man standing behind him. He was turned just enough to also see the shimmering dark colored blade of the assailant pointed at his back. "Ahh… I see now. You have your sword back. So, what exactly are you planning to do with that, Ryouto Yanjan from Cyril? Or should I say Knight Yarvon?"

Ryo smirked as he twisted the sword at Joliet's back. "So… you know who I am, who I *really* am. Hmph. Interesting. You seem to know a little of everything." Ryo clenched his teeth together as he eyed the man in front of him who seemed at first to be most benevolent. "Well, then, allow me to fill you in on how I escaped the prison cell. Actually, it's quite simple." Ryo reached into his pocket and continued talking. "After your bodyguard, Gallahan, informed me of tonight's mutiny he was kind enough to give me my sword back."

"Gallahan…?" Joliet repeated slowly as he raised an eyebrow and began thinking.

"Oh, yes! But that's not the best part." Finally, Ryo retracted his hand from his pocket and produced a jingling sound. "I was able to use my sword to reach over and retrieve these keys from the nail hanging over on the far wall. Thankfully, my sword was long enough to reach over there." Ryo then tossed the keys to the floor out in front of Joliet so he could see them better. "Nothing fancy like you may be thinking…"

"I see…" Joliet spoke as if he were distracted by something. "You're quite resourceful, I'll give you that. A skill like that is an invaluable tool to have at one's disposal."

Ryo ignored the merchant's compliment, if it was one, and lowered his sword to gently tap Joliet's left side where his heart was. "So, tell me. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't cut your heart out right now!"

There was a pause between the time that Ryo spoke and the time that Joliet spoke. The man smiled as he said, "Because, I can help you in your quest."

"What are you talking! What quest? You…" Ryo grimaced. "…You don't even know me! How could you possible understand anything of my intenti…"

"I know the real culprit behind the attack on your city, behind the attack on Cyril!" Joliet quickly interrupted with a smirk.

Ryo froze at the words. He felt the blood in his body instantly turn to ice. His eyes widened as memories of his hometown came flooding back to his mind. *What! He knows the true mastermind! But how?* He thought to himself in utter disbelief. *He has to be lying!* It wasn't possible for him to know this. It couldn't be possible.

"You're… you're lying… You don't know… Y-you can't know that…" came the shaky voice. His words sounded anything less than confident now than what they were when he first started this exchange of words with the merchant. Ryo felt his whole body begin to tremble and sweat. It was a lie. It had to be. It was just another way for this man to try to weasel out of a tight spot, right? Ryo had to know for sure. After all, this was his first lead. And he had to take any possible leads to their conclusions.

"How do you know that I don't know? You said yourself that I seem to know a little of everything." Joliet said simply. "See, on the one hand I could be lying; however on the other, I

could be telling the truth. But if you kill me now with that sword then you'll know neither answer. It's your choice."

Ryo gritted his teeth. As much as he didn't want to admit it, Joliet was right. If Ryo were to end the merchant's life now, then this lead, this *only* lead that may clear his name of any misunderstandings, this lead that may allow him live in his hometown peacefully, this lead that may let him be with Tinaro, would be lost forever.

Tinaro... Her name burned in his mind as he imagined her angelic face. Her radiant smile. Her beautiful blue eyes. Her perfect shoulder length hair. Her sweet aroma. Ryo closed his eyes and sighed. *I wonder what she is doing right now. I miss her so much. To be given the chance to see her again would be my greatest desire.*

Ryo slowly opened his eyes and smirked. "You knew who I was this entire time, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"Hmph. Hahahaha... Fascinating...!" Ryo straightened himself and cautiously retracted his sword. "All right then. Let's hear what you have to say. But I warn you, if this is a waste of my time, then..."

"Trust me," Joliet said deeply with his back still turned to the boy. "This, is definitely worth your time."

"Okay. I'm listening," Ryo said skeptically.

Joliet breathed in deeply and slowly exhaled. Light flickered from the lantern casting eerie shadows on the walls. The shuffling of the sailor's feet above deck had long since ceased and only the gentle crackle of the lantern's wick was

heard as Ryo anxiously awaited the merchant's words. A muffled bang preceded what Joliet began to say.

"You see... Gallahan is not actually my bodyguard. He's actually a ninja!"

"A... a ninja...?" Ryo said intrigued. *How could Gallahan be a...* Then suddenly Ryo remembered his encounter with Gallahan earlier how that he suddenly appeared in the prison block without so much as a splash. *Could he really be... a ninja?*

"Yes! And ninja's are expert at deception!" Joliet suddenly spun his left shoulder back and flung the lantern back in Ryo's direction.

Ryo was caught off guard and barely had time to raise his arms up in defense. The lantern struck and shattered on his left forearm. Ryo hissed and cried out in surprise and pain as he felt small pieces of glass pierce his skin. The oil from the lamp spilled all over the wall and all over the floor at Ryo's feet. The still burning wick flew in the air over to the wall and ignited the oil on the walls and the oil that had dripped down to the floor. Fire erupted seemingly everywhere at once. With so much combustible material, the fire spread quickly.

Ryo backed away from the ignition place and shielded his eyes with his right arm. The flames rose quickly and the heat radiating off the flames caused him to sweat even more than he was. But he felt something else pouring down his face that wasn't sweat. When he reached up to wipe it away Ryo winced in pain. He retracted his finger and glanced at the liquid oozing down his hand. Crimson. It was his own blood! Ryo then became aware of the sharp slicing feeling on his

cheek. He then realized that the glass from the lantern must have sliced open a deep wound in his cheek!

Argh! That... that freak! Ryo thought angrily. *Where'd he go?* Ryo peered through the thickening smoke only to see that Joliet had disappeared from view. *He's gone. He must have escaped the moment I was caught off guard with that lantern.*

Suddenly, the ship rocked violently with the sound of splitting wood echoing throughout the halls of the cell block. "What now?" Ryo asked as he looked around and eventually up. The sounds of the sailors above deck suddenly loudened as they screamed out in seeming anguish.

"I don't know what's going on but I need to get above deck. Now!" Ryo then looked down at the flames before him which were growing rapidly. "But first, I'll need to put these flames out."

Ryo placed his hands out in front of him with his palms down and fingers spread like spider legs. He closed his eyes and began to focus. *I need to draw up water to quench this fire. Focus, Ryo. You can do this! Concentrate on the water around you and pull it up!* Ryo felt a familiar tingle course across his flesh. *That's it!* Then, he slowly raised his arms up leading with his wrists. Slowly, and matching the pace of Ryo's hand motion, water began to seep up through the floor boards. The fire slowly began to sizzle as the water and it met creating a steam in the wake. Then suddenly, Ryo thrust his palms outward. An overwhelming torrent of water emerged and consumed the raging inferno in front of him; and, with a flick of Ryo's wrists downward, the water receded back from whence it came. Where the fire had once been remained only blackened scarred boards and smoldering streams of smoke.

Suddenly, the ship rocked violently once again; however, there were two separate sounds of splitting wood echoing throughout the belly of the ship.

"What's going on?" Ryo said as he braced himself against the wall. He looked at the charred wooden boards and supports and saw them visibly flex under the shuddering of the ship. *Those won't last long under this pressure. But at least they're no longer on fire. Now to see what's causing these tremors and put a stop to them.*

The moment Ryo's head emerged from below deck, a booming sound echoed from across the waters. The brief flash that preceded the boom caught Ryo's eyes and drew his attention in that direction, the starboard side of the ship. The unusually thick fog made it difficult to see until a second boom sounded followed quickly by a flash. That flash lit up the sky just enough for Ryo to see the form of a ship. Hurdling through the fog was a cannon ball that pierced through the fog creating a hole in its path. The sphere struck the ship with a crash and the ship shuddered once again.

The screams of the sailors on deck brought Ryo back to reality as he watched them scatter. A few of the sailors who had not braced for impact were flung overboard from the last tremor. The ones who had braced themselves and remained on deck were feverously running around trying to salvage what *was* quickly becoming a broken ship.

As the sails were in the process of being lowered, the helmsman furiously guided the ship out of harm's way. But his efforts were vain. In fact, as he turned the ship "out of the way" he placed himself in the firing range of the other ships cannons. A flash and boom echoed from across the sea as a cannon ball streaked through the lessening fog and crashed into the wheel and tore through the left half of the

helmsman body. The man spiraled backward and thumped onto the deck several times as his lifeless body bounced and rolled before coming to a stop at the back railing. A trail of blood traced his final path until it pooled at the gaping wound of the lifeless body.

Another boom accompanied two more booms. A second later the ship rocked violently from the impacts. Shards of wood and shrapnel flew out from the impact points wounding several sailors even blinding a couple when the shrapnel caught them in the eyes. The ship creaked and seemed to moan under the assault. The ship was literally being blasted to pieces!

A blur of aqua caught Ryo's attention as he slowly emerged from his observance point. The aqua blur shot right past him and towards the wheel. When Ryo followed the figure he instantly recognized it as Raine. The boy grabbed onto the wheel and continued in the same path as his predecessor. Except this time, Raine was successful in evading the enemy's barrage. The cannon balls of the enemy ship splashed harmlessly into the water surrounding the ship.

Hmph. Ryo huffed as he watched Raine's determination to salvage the dying ship. But something told Ryo that his efforts were in vain. It was like a shiver that ran the length of his spine and extended to the rest of his body. *This feeling...* Ryo turned towards the direction of the other ship. *This feeling of hopelessness... I wonder...* Ryo crossed his left arm in front of his body, breathed in deeply, and focused the swirling energies coursing around him. Then, as he exhaled, Ryo swept his hand out in front of him summoning a wind that swept away the fog just long enough for him to see that their pursuer was the same ship they encounter earlier in their journey! The pirates were back and they were angry! They had brought out the big guns, literally.

"That's what I thought," Ryo said to himself. "I guess that explains that feeling from earlier." Suddenly, a hand clenched down on his right shoulder. Acting instantly, Ryo lowered his right shoulder, gripped his sword with his right hand, and threw his left elbow back at the elbow joint of the other man. The man stumbled releasing his grip. Ryo then unsheathed his sword with his right hand, spun around, and brought the sharp blade mere inches away from the neck of the victim.

"Wait!" the man pleaded as he tentatively raised his hands up in surrender.

Ryo took a step back and lowered his sword slightly and retreated it slightly back to his side. Ryo's gritted teeth slowly loosened as his mind slowly caught up to the level of the adrenaline that was already pulsing through his veins. But once he recognized the man, he felt his body tense and his teeth gritting once again.

"You…!" Ryo narrowed his eyes as he felt his blood begin to boil. "Captain Hanruh!"

"Please! I ask for your help…"

Ryo suddenly reached out with his left hand and firmly gripped the captain's shirt effectively startling the man and breaking his sentence off. He then leveled his sword parallel with the captain's eyes.

"You!" came the angered toned. "Why should I help a traitor like you!"

"What?" the captain quivered. "A traitor? What are you—?"

"Shat up! You know exactly what I'm talking about! You were planning to sell me out to that merchant weren't you?"

When the captain didn't answer immediately, Ryo got even more angry. "Weren't you!"

"I-I-" Hanruh stammered averting Ryo's gaze.

"Look into my eyes! Is it true?"

Hanruh slowly shifted his gaze to match Ryo's. The moment Hanruh's eyes met Ryo's eyes Hanruh was frozen with terror. There was something in Ryo's eyes, something dark. Something terrible. Something that snarled for freedom like a caged monster. It was like a tremendous, overpowering darkness that couldn't be quenched. An overwhelming force that could not be stopped. Ryo's eyes were no longer a peaceful blue color but a dark violet almost black color. The piercing color and ferocity of Ryo's eyes paralyzed the captain to the point of speechlessness.

"Y-y-y-y-y-e-e-e-s-s-s-s…" came the tremblingly cry.

Ryo growled and narrowed his eyes more and increased his grip as he felt an intense feeling wash across his body giving him an unusual amount of strength.

"Why? Why would you do this to me? After all I've done for you, this is how you repay me?" Ryo seethed.

"I-I-I- d-d-don't know! Please! I-I beg you! Spare me!"

Ryo didn't buy a word of it. "You don't know?" he scoffed. He shifted his blade slightly making a chink sound of the metal blade. He felt the captain squirm beneath his grasp.

"O-okay, okay! I-I-I- needed the money!"

"Needed it for what?" Ryo seethed angrily. *This had better be a good answer.* Ryo thought. He no longer heard the cries

of the sailors around him nor did he hear the boom and crash of the cannon balls of the enemy pirates. Ryo's attention was focused on the man who had betrayed him. Well, who was *going* to betray him.

"I… I needed the money for ship repairs and… and for flowers…"

"F-flowers?" Ryo repeated confused. "You were going to use the money… from selling me out… to buy… flowers?" It was unthinkable! "That answer isn't good eno…!"

"They were for my parents and sister!" interrupted Hanruh.

Ryo froze. *They were for his parents and sister?* Ryo thought about that statement and reflected back on what he had been told about that night. *For his parents and sister who were brutally slaughtered at the hands of a band of merciless pirates who had emerged suddenly from the shadows. I can't imagine...* Then suddenly an image flashed in Ryo's mind: a party. Another image: a familiar face. Yet another image: the sight of a sword sticking out of the ground. And then, the scene suddenly unfolded in his mind almost as vivid as the day it happened: a battle cry sounded and several men emerged from the shadows and began their slaughter of an unsuspecting village.

"You don't know what's it's like to have seen your parents and sister brutally murdered before your eyes! You don't know the guilt that I've had to bear all these years knowing that it was my fault they died to begin with! You don't have any idea what I've been through! Who are you to judge what I do? Who do you think you are!"

He's right... I don't have any idea what it feels like. My parents were killed suddenly just like this man's parents. But unlike me, he actually saw his parents killed. I didn't. Ryo

sighed as he felt his grip on Hanruh's shirt quiver. *That night… When all that happened… I was with Tinaro…* Ryo felt himself calming down more as her face and name came to his mind. This was the second time he had thought about her in the same day. How he missed her! How he longed to be back with her!

"You're right… I don't know what that's like. But…" Ryo's grip tightened as he spoke. "I do know what losing your parents feels like. And I do know that selling someone out for money is wrong. I've sought for a purpose for my life and up until now, I've searched in vain." As Ryo continued speaking, he glanced at his sword and clenched it fiercely, feeling the rage building up within himself once again. "I see now that I must rid the world of people who misuse their leadership and authority for dubious actions and under the table deals. I must act as a knight of justice. I must be… the knight of Weyard!" Ryo unshakingly leveled his sword at Hanruh's eyes. "And you shall be the first of many to feel my *justice*!" Ryo raised his sword up ready to embrace his new found "justice."

Suddenly, Ryo felt a chilling tingle on his neck warning him of danger. He released his grip on the captain and turned, but his reaction was too slow. Ryo was brought back to reality harshly when he felt something cold piercing his back. In fact, Ryo felt multiple piercing sensations flood his back, each accompanied by the same frigid sensation. There were too many to number!

Ryo dropped to one knee and impaled his sword into the deck. Ryo supported his weight on his left hand, left knee and right foot as he used the sword in his right hand as a crutch. He doubled over in pain as his grip on his sword grew tighter. His teeth ground together from the sheer intensity of the suffering. His left hand reached up and rested on his

stomach hoping to relieve some of the pain but to no avail. Ryo gasped deep, labored breaths as he felt his life force draining from the wounds in his back. He felt his temperature start to drop. Ryo closed his eyes and grunted feeling another chilling wave of pain arching throughout his body. Slowly, Ryo slinked his left hand across his stomach and to his back and the source of the pain. Suddenly, Ryo's fingers came in contact with it. It… it almost felt like…

Is that… ice? Ryo thought in anguish as his eyes suddenly widened. He turned his head to look under his right arm at his back. Ryo had turned just enough to see what "it" was. "It" was actually an icicle! His back was riddled with sharp, pointed icicles!

"What?" Ryo felt the object again and again felt the familiar chill of ice. "But how?" Ryo winced in the chilling pain. "Who?" Ryo straightened himself as best he could while still on his left knee and turned slightly to see who or what had done this. As Ryo gazed over his right arm, his eyes fell upon the only individual who was looking at him. The individual had one hand extended out towards him. The individual who was still at the wheel who eyed Ryo with a look of angered satisfaction.

"Raine?" Ryo whispered the name as he tried to grasp what had just happened. The boy glared at Ryo and huffed with great exertion. "Did he really just do that?" Ryo was in shock as his gaze was still fixated on Raine. The aqua haired boy then took his eyes off Ryo for a second and looked toward the…

"Captain!"

Ryo heard the horrored scream from the boy. Ryo saw the boy's lips move to form the words and his eyes widened in

terror. Ryo slowly turned to see what had upset Raine so terribly. Ryo suddenly drew in a short, deep breath as he saw the captain standing behind him with a spike of ice protruding from his forehead! The captain's eyes were wide and his face expressioned with surprised pain. Blood slowly oozed down the captain's face as his stiff body slowly started to fall backwards. His lifeless body landed with a great thud on the deck as some of the icicle shattered. Ryo stared at the body in shock.

Did that... did that really just happen? Ryo asked himself. *Is he really gone? But... he was mine... Still...* Ryo smirked as he turned his head towards Raine. *He got what was coming to him and from an unexpected source.*

Raine's mouth quivered as he saw what he had done. "No... Captain... It can't be..." Tears began to stream down his cheeks as he saw the man who had acted as his father lying there lifeless on the deck. Raine closed his eyes for a second hoping that this was all a bad dream. But when he opened them, reality began to set in. His eyes shifted towards the hunched figure at the captain's feet who was smirking at him. Raine's distressed look soon turned into rage as he felt his hand grip the wheel more fiercely.

"You...!" Raine began in soft billowing anger. "It's your fault! I'll make you pay!" Raine placed both hands onto the railing and leapt over the wheel and onto the main deck.

Suddenly, a boom echoed from across the waters followed by the sound of jingling metal chains. Raine looked over just in time to see what appeared to be two cannon balls flying at the ship. Then his eyes widened as he suddenly recognized what it was. It was a chain shot! This ammunition consisted of two balls connected with a chain which was typically used to take out the mast and sails. And it did just

that! The chain shot luckily struck the aft portion of the mast and sheered through the wood with a mighty crash. Splinters of wood flew out from the mast as the wood moaned and began to fall. Some of the sailors screamed as the rigging and sails came crashing down on them. The heavy mass shattered the railing on the port side and buckled the wooden boards of the deck. Both Raine and Ryo shielded their eyes from the splinters of wood and debris that flew into the air. The air settled and the sounds of cannon fire ceased. When the mast finally settled onto the deck and the debris in the air mostly settled, Raine looked over at Ryo only to realize that the mast rested between him and Ryo!

Ryo lowered his arms and looked up at the mast which rested mere feet from his position. "That was close..." Ryo whispered to himself. He then calculated his distance to the mast. "Another five feet and I would have been a goner..." He then looked up past the fallen mast to see the aqua haired boy who had been stopped in his tracks. Ryo couldn't help but smirk as he looked between the boy and the mast. "Good thing this landed here otherwise..." Ryo stopped when he shivered with the feeling of imminence. "Something... something's coming..." Another shiver washed over his body more fiercely than the first. "...And it's big..."

Ryo focused his energies towards listening to the surroundings. *Where? Where is it?* Ryo scanned the deck. Nothing. He then turned his head towards the waters and listened. He heard the lapping of the water against the ship, the rush of wind into his ears, the sound of falling water...

Wait...! That sound... It sounds like... a waterfall... Ryo furrowed his brow but continued to focus on the sound. It was very faint, a long distance away; therefore, not a threat. However, the sound seemed to be getting louder indicating

it getting closer. *What is that?* Whatever is was, it seemed to be fueled not by the ocean but by a single point somewhere off the starb…

"Tidal wave!"

Ryo suddenly directed his attention to the voice of the sailor who was pointing off to the starboard side, the same side as the pirate ship. But instead of seeing the ship, Ryo and everyone who looked saw only a wall of water rushing to meet them!

"Ohhh… Not good…" Ryo said with wide eyes. *Guess that explains the feeling from before… But still… what was that point of energy? Like the source… Like something was fueling this wave…* Ryo slowly lifted his gaze as the wall of water approached the ship.

"Brace for impact!" one of the sailors yelled.

Don't have time to think about it! Ryo sheathed his blade and grabbed onto the railing and prayed for survival.

The tsunami towered over the ship as droplets of water fell to the deck. Then, in an instant, the wave crashed down on the boat with incredible, sheering force. The deafening crash drowned out the death screams of many on board the ship as the tsunami buried the ship under feet of water. The ship snapped easily under the pressure and smashed into countless pieces.

A brief moment later, the ocean came to rest with a numerous pieces of floating boards representing what was left of Hanruh's ship. That… and bodies.

The pirate ship floated over to the site where Hanruh's ship once was. It parted the boards as the crew members peered

over the sides looking for survivors. One of them shouted, then lifted a spear and threw it down into the water. The death screams of a man echoed across the waters and soon faded. A few more screams sounded as more survivors were discovered trying to use the boards to float on. Another man lifted his spear as he spotted another survivor. As he tossed the weapon down it was met with a small wall of ocean water that leapt up and swept the spear to the side. When the water fell, the aqua haired boy glared exhaustedly at the pirate.

The pirate gritted his teeth and grabbed another spear but was stopped when a hand grabbed the same spear.

"That's enough…!"

"Captain!" the pirate said surprised.

"Hmph…" the man peered down at the boy and smiled. "Seems this one is special. We could use someone like him…" The captain lifted his hand palm-side up toward the boy. The water around the boy bubbled for a second. Then a column of water formed under the boy which grew in height and approached the ship. With the flick of the captain's wrist, the column of water shot the boy over onto the deck in a sopping mess.

"Well well… Let's have a better look at ya…!" stated the captain as he turned to the boy. "Tell me, what's your name?"

The boy huddled on the deck and coughed up a bit of water. He shivered as he felt an ocean breeze blow across deck. He heard the voice, but didn't respond. He couldn't. His hands rocked violently as his gaze was more or less focused on the deck. His breaths were short and labored.

"Hmmmm… Well! You're name! Or should we just kill…!"

"My name…" the boy began. He shot his eyes up at the captain and shouted, "My name is Raine!"

The captain's eyes widened suddenly as he inhaled sharply.

"Sir?" one of the sailors said.

A brief moment of silence followed as the captain studied the boy. "Take this boy below deck and have him cleaned up! Now!" ordered the captain.

"Sir, yes, sir!" the sailors around him said as they quickly lifted Raine to his feet and proceeded to follow orders.

The captain watched his men lift the boy to his feet and carry him off. He watched them until they disappeared below deck. He then turned to the seas and sighed. *I never thought… After all these years… To think that I'd finally see him after all these years…* He turned to back to where they had taken the boy. *He fought to the very end… That's just like you… my son…*

"Captain. Captain! Captain Aquis!"

"Hmmm?" replied the captain as he looked at the man who addressed him by the name. "What is it?"

"That boy… He said his name was…"

"He's my son…" Aquis stated frankly.

The sailor gasped with surprise. "Huh… How bout that?" He quickly composed himself. "Well…?"

"Well what?" shouted the annoyed captain.

"What should we do now? Should we still scour the area for survivors? As you can see, there's not much left of the ship. Those who happened to survive have been taken care of. If there were any remaining, they wouldn't last very long out here."

Aquis glanced across the waters seeing the wooden boards floating aimlessly on the ocean surface. A cold blast of wind washed over the deck sending shivers down his back. The sailor was right about one thing, any who were still out there wouldn't survive if just for the wind alone.

"Did you find the other one? The wind user?"

The sailor shook his head. "No, sir. No sign of him. It's possible and very likely that he drowned along with the rest of the crew."

Aquis closed his eyes, inhaled, and slowly exhaled. "Very well then. We've had a long day and I'm tired. Let's head out!" As the ship slowly began to leave the scene, Aquis turned to look upon the wreckage once more. A smirk appeared on his face as the scene faded across the horizon.

The ocean waters swayed effortlessly back and forth with the remains of a once sturdy vessel. Floating on the ocean's surface were countless pieces of wood and debris not to mention the bodies that lay lifeless on the water's surface or speared on pieces of the debris. The pale light of Luna cast its glow upon the victims and it seemed as though Luna herself mourned the passing of so many people. Gently splashing of the ocean waters against a few of the stacks of wood echoed across the waters.

Suddenly, a small board on one of the stacks of wood shook and slide off into the water. Then the whole stack of wood began to shake. More and more of the debris fell into the

ocean until finally the last piece fell away revealing the crumpled figure of a man. He was badly battered and bruised… but alive. As he looked about at the destruction and the death around him, he felt his grip tighten on his sword. His resolve remained unchanged.

He closed his eyes and whispered through clenched teeth, "I cannot… die! I… will… become…" When his eyes opened, they were shaded purple. "…the Knight of Weyard!"

Chapter 10: Epilogue

Epilogue

The sun shone brightly upon the land of Weyard as it cast its warming rays upon the shores of the southeastern Angaraian continent beachhead. Not a cloud could be seen in the sky for miles and miles. A cooling breeze blew in from off of the ocean filling the air with the refreshing smell that could only be associated with the ocean. Waves gently rolled up the shore line and then retreated back into the sea. The sounds of calling seagulls echoed overhead as a small group of the birds glided in the air scouring the land for food. Others were contented to waddle on foot in search of their food.

A lone bird from above spotted something of interest and decided to swoop down and check it out. The creature landed nearby and cocked its head slightly looking for danger. It then ran a few steps, stopped, and cocked its head again. The bird ran a few more steps toward its target and stopped. Peering cautiously at the item, the bird took a few more steps towards it when suddenly, something moved. Behind the bird's target, a large object suddenly rolled over and a small shiny object streaked through the air at the bird. Startled the seagull took off into the air squawking, no doubt cursings, at whatever the larger mass was.

Impaled in the sand where the bird once stood was a small, grayish colored kunai knife. Behind the knife lay a small mat with an open box of food on top of it.

"Stupid birds," the voice cursed. "That one almost had my lunch! How's a girl supposed to sunbathe in peace without having to worry if her food is gonna be stolen!" The girl

who'd thrown the knife reached over and pulled it out of the sand and put it back into her bag. She then swiped the sand off of her arms and off of her two piece purple, white polka dotted bathing suit.

"Feizhi! Calm down! They're only doing what's natural: scavenging for food," another voice piped in.

"Well they can go scavenge elsewhere!" Feizhi leaned back down trying to ignore the screeching of the seagulls. "Ugh! Why won't they shut up?"

"Probably 'cause they can see that you have food laying around. Anyways, just try to relax and enjoy your time out here. It's not often that we have time off."

"I know that, Maranda. You don't need to remind me." Feizhi sighed as she felt the cooling ocean wind blow through her violet hair. "Father's kept me so busy at the dojo that I forget sometimes to relax. And I've also been working hard ever since those travelers came through our town a while back."

"Travelers?" Maranda repeated confused.

"Oh right! You weren't here then were you." Feizhi reached behind her head and rested on her hands. She briefly turned to look at the short, slightly heavy-set brunette before looking back up at the sky and continuing. "A group of about four travelers came through town in pursuit of another group that had committed some serious crimes back in a town called Vale. One of the members, Isaac I think, came into the dojo and exhibited some unusual power. I think he called it Psynergy. Anyway, I had a vision of Hsu in danger. And it was thanks to his group that Hsu was rescued from almost certain death."

"Oh yeah! I remember people saying something bout that! I think that happened about a month before I moved here, right?"

"Hmmm… Yeah, sounds about right."

"So this Isaac must have been some guy, huh?" Maranda said with a smile trying to picture him in her mind.

"Yeah…" Feizhi said dreamily. "He sure was. He was a tall blond haired, blue eyed warrior with a kind, compassionate heart. Even though helping Hsu would put his group farther behind, he still took the time to help us. That's a real man."

"Wow! He sounds like a pretty amazing guy!" Maranda simply gazed up into the blue heavens dreaming about finding her "knight-in-shining-armor" someday. "You know, someday, I'm gonna marry a guy who has blond hair and blue eyes."

"Really?" Feizhi said with raised brow.

"I told my mom that too and she was all like 'don't limit yourself to just one type of guy' and 'there are many other good looking guys who don't have blond hair and blue eyes.' But, whatever. I'll show her. I'm gonna find him and we're gonna live together and be hap…"

Loud squawking a few dozens paces down the beachhead interrupted Maranda from finishing what she had to say. "What's going on over there?"

Both girls turned to look at the source of the disturbance. A number of seagulls swooped down from the air and landed on the beach near a larger number of gulls that had gathered around something. A couple of the birds started

fighting amongst themselves as the squawking grew even louder.

"Now *that*, is really annoying!" Maranda admitted as she looked from Feizhi to the birds.

"I know, isn't it?"

A single bird broke away from the pack and started to fly in the air towards the two girls. A couple of other birds gave chase and started to fight the first bird for whatever it had in its mouth. The first bird fought desperately to keep its prize but in the struggle, it dropped something out of its mouth. The object fluttered down towards the girls before landing a few feet from Maranda.

"What is it?" Feizhi asked. A tingle in the back of her neck told her that something wasn't right.

"It's a piece of cloth…" Maranda said confused as she picked it up and examined it. "Weird… It's stained with something… Almost looks like blood…"

Feizhi furrowed her brow and looked around the sand trying to recall why this same situation and this same conversation seemed so familiar. It was like a… a deja vu. "Weird… For some reason, I feel like this has already happened. Like… I've seen this in my dreams or something…"

"Really? That's weird." Maranda said as she continued to study the cloth feeling the soft fabric in her fingers. *This is really nice material though…* she thought. *I wonder where it came from…*

Feizhi turned to look over at the squawking birds and stood up.

"What's up?" Maranda asked.

"I… I don't know… For some reason I'm getting a weird feeling like someone is in trouble or something." Feizhi peered over at the birds more closely. She turned her head and motioned, "Come on, Maranda. Let's go check out what the big commotion is all about. If anything, I just want to chase these birds away."

"I hear 'ya!" Maranda agreed.

As soon as Maranda was on her feet, both females ran over to the group of quarreling and screeching birds hoping to scare them away. The tactic worked! The gulls scattered and flew up into the air screeching cursings at the girls.

"It worked!" Maranda said as she looked up at the gulls and sneered. "That'll teach…"

"Look! On the beach! A body!" Feizhi screamed.

Both girls looked and saw the interest of the birds. Indeed, it was a body! It looked like a younger boy in his late teen years. His blond hair was matted and frayed and there were cuts and bruises all over his body. The person's clothes were torn up no doubt from the gulls. His right hand was clenched around something that was partially buried in the sand. Feizhi instantly recognized the object as a sword.

"Is he… dead?" Maranda whispered.

"I… I… I dunno…" Feizhi inched closer as she felt every muscle in her body tense. Sweat began to bead up on her forehead and roll down her face. "He… doesn't look dead… I think…" Tentatively, she reached her hand out to touch the boy. Her hand visibly shook as it got closer to him. Feizhi

swallowed hard and gently tapped the boy's arm. *It's cold but that could be just from the water.*

"Well?" Maranda said as she slowly circled around to get a better look at him. The boy had a healing scar across his cheek but was for the most part pretty good looking.

Feizhi breathed in confidence and exhaled her fears and finally rested her hand on his arm. It was slightly warm. *I was right! He is still alive! Let me just find his wrist and…* Feizhi felt his wrist and could barely detect the steady pulsing of blood.

"He's still alive. But he needs attention right away."

"Well? Uh… what are we supposed to do?" Maranda asked somewhat frantically.

"Help me get him back to the village. They'll know exactly how to help him."

Light slowly began to flood his vision as his eyes slowly parted. Feeling began to return to his numbed body and he slowly began to become aware of his surroundings. Whatever he was resting on was soft and there was something wrapped around him keeping him warm. He inhaled sharply and barely began to sit up slowly.

"Ohh… you're awake!"

Through squinted eyes, he lazily looked over at the person next to him who had spoken those words. A young, slender lady sat by his bedside with eyes glistening with the color of amethyst and with hair matching the color of her eyes. Her smile was warm and inviting.

"Who…?" he began.

"Shhh…" the girl hushed as he helped him lay back down. "You need your rest. My name is Feizhi and you are in the town of Xian now. My friend and I found you lying on the beach and we had you brought here and had your wounds treated."

"Ohh…" the boy responded briefly looking her over. *She's kinda cute.* He felt twangs of pain shoot through his back and then subside as if to get his attention back from staring at the girl awkwardly. He moved his hand up to his shoulder and felt the wrappings of bandages where his wounds had been. He moved his hand across his chest and then up to his face. His fingers stopped when they came across an uneven section of his skin. Suddenly, his mind raced back to the exact night, the exact moment when he had gotten this scar on his face. He felt his pulse race faster and his breathing increased.

"Are… you okay?" the girl asked placing her hand on his arm.

The boy felt the smooth caress of the girl's hand on his arm and felt himself calming down. He took a deep breath and tried to shove his previous memories back into the remotest part of his mind hoping to forget about those things that had happened. The boy then looked over at the girl with his blue eyes and replied, "Yeah. I'm fine."

"Good! I'm glad to hear it!" Feizhi removed her hand from his arm and stretched and yawned.

The boy observed her movements and the subtle messages that she gave off. One thing was immediately clear to him: she looked absolutely exhausted. He figured that she must have been up all night watching over him. He had no idea

how far it was from where she had found him and to where he was now; however, the boy figured that the journey must have been very tiring for her.

The door opened up and another female entered the room. She had brown, shoulder length hair and brown eyes to match. This girl, though not as slender as the first, had a very adorable face. For her size, the boy thought, *Hmm... She's kinda cute too.*

"Ohh! He's awake is he?" the girl stated obviously as she walked over closer to the bed.

"Yeah. Woke up just a few moments ago," Feizhi responded.

"Well my name is Maranda Aker. What's your name?" she asked the boy.

"I…uhh… My name…" he hesitated for a moment. "My name is Knight."

"It's nice to meet you, Knight," Maranda said with a slight bow.

"Well, Knight," Feizhi started, "I don't know how long you'll be here but I've made arrangements for you to stay here as long as you need too. My father owns the dojo next door and has agreed to meet with you later if you're interested."

Knight nodded.

"And—and I'll be here to help you as well!" Maranda said quickly as she felt her face flush with color.

"Well thank you both. I appreciate it."

"I think that you need your rest. We can talk later," Feizhi said as she stood up. "Come on, Maranda, let's give the man his rest."

"All right! See 'ya later, Knight!" Maranda waved and headed out the door.

"Goodbye, sir!" Feizhi said as she too headed out of the room and shut the door behind her.

Knight waved goodbye to both girls. He then placed his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. *I finally made it here.* He grinned as he thought, *I'm beginning to like Xian already.*